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TESTING 'MADNESS'

- No Covid-19 testing kits for training providers until DfE develops 'bespoke solution'
- Course starts and return to learning set for delays well beyond March 8 reopening
- Skills minister accused of 'indifference' towards non-college sector

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COLLEGE AND FE PROVIDER REOPENING PLAN

Mixed reaction to Johnson's roadmap out of lockdown

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The prime minister's plan to allow all students in colleges and further education providers to return for face-to-face teaching from March 8 was met with mixed reaction this week.

Boris Johnson laid out his "roadmap" for easing lockdown restrictions on Monday and while leaders said they are keen to get students back into the classroom, concern was raised that the move could markedly increase Covid-19 transmission.

Central to the prime minister's plan for a "safe" reopening is the introduction of twice-weekly home-testing for staff and learners. College students will also receive three onsite tests upon their return, but there are warnings about the "very significant logistical challenges" this will cause.

Controversially, independent and adult community learning providers will have to wait until the end of the month – a decision that has prompted outrage (see page 5).

Schools, colleges and FE providers have been closed to all but the most vulnerable students and children of key workers since January 5.

New guidance from the Department for Education about the wider reopening of FE providers makes clear that they can phase the return of learners over the course of the reopening week, and they can continue to adopt a blended approach of remote and onsite teaching.

However, it is the DfE's "expectation" that all students aged 16 to 19 should "undertake the majority of their planned hours onsite". There is no rule for how much time adult learners need to spend on campus learning.

Bill Watkin, chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association, welcomed this flexibility but called for his members to "have the autonomy to reopen in a way that reflects



Boris Johnson

their different local circumstances and student populations".

"Sixth-form colleges are keen to get students back into the classroom as soon as possible, and as safely as possible," he said.

"The key to a successful return from this date is flexibility. Opening to all students at the same time presents a range of very significant logistical challenges, not least the requirement to test all students and staff."

Watkin added that it is his association's view that the "most effective way" to reopen safely would have "been through a phased return to learning that prioritised sixth-formers pursuing practical courses and reduced the number of students on site in order to minimise the risk of transmission".

Association of Colleges chief executive David Hughes said the disruption to learning due to lockdowns has been "challenging for students' education and wellbeing", so it was "good to hear the prime minister announce that many college students will be returning to face-to-face learning from next month".

He explained that colleges typically have thousands of students across varying ages, and

they face a "complex task" now to prioritise who starts back first.

Hughes also called on the government to publish the scientific evidence that sits behind the announcement as this will be "important in reassuring staff and students of the low risks involved, with the right controls in place".

He added that the requirement for mass testing will be a "logistical challenge", but colleges have used lockdown to "prepare their sites and it will be a crucial element of keeping students and staff safe, alongside face coverings, social distancing, ventilation, phasing and rotas".

The testing of students will be conducted with the rapid lateral flow tests which can produce results within 30 minutes. Concerns have, however, been widely reported about the reliability of the results.

University and College Union general secretary Jo Grady said the tests are "completely unsuitable" for campuses. "They are unreliable, and incorrect negative results may give people a false sense of security, increasing the risk of outbreaks," she claimed.

Grady labelled Johnson's plan to reopen education providers at the same time "irresponsible".

"Pushing students and staff back onsite increases the risk of more Covid outbreaks and threatens to undo the country's hard work to get infection rates down," she said.

Elsewhere, Sue Pember, policy director of adult education network HOLEX, said she "agrees" with the roadmap and the flexibilities it gives her members to "bring back their learners safely".

She was also "pleased" and that coronavirus tests "will be made available to all centres" by the end of March.

The Department for Education said the return for all students is being prioritised due to the "significant and proven impact" caused by being out of school and college to the health and wellbeing of young people.

COLLEGE AND FE PROVIDER REOPENING PLAN

Delay to Covid-19 testing for providers branded 'madness'

BILLY CAMDEN

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From front

Exclusive

The government has failed to explain why private training providers will need to wait until the end of next month to apply for Covid-19 testing kits, a decision branded as "madness".

The move has proven particularly controversial as colleges are receiving the kits ahead of a return to face-to-face training on March 8.

Officials are developing a "demand-led model" to allow independent providers to order the kits for students and staff but it is unclear as to why this is still not available.

Despite this, Department for Education guidance states that it "expects" every 16-to-19 student will "attend their FE provider in person, and will undertake the majority of their planned hours on site" from two weeks' time.

This "unfair" and "depressing picture" has been lambasted by private providers, especially as prime minister Boris Johnson has made mass testing central to reopening schools and further education settings "safely".

Providers have warned that the decision constitutes a "significant risk" and some fear they will now have to delay course starts as a result.

The DfE could not provide an explanation for why its "bespoke solution" for independent providers to order the kits is not yet available or how it will work. A spokesperson only said it will "take a few weeks to implement".

Graham Howe, executive director at the Apprenticeship College, told *FE Week* his provider won a contract through the DfE's recent traineeships tender and they are "keen" to deliver to help the government's



Corrina Hembury

goal of tripling the number of starts on the pre-employment programme over the next five months.

But without the testing kits "some course starts will need to be delayed until the end of March, at the earliest", he warned.

Howe added that some of his provider's current trainees have "little or no access" to the technology needed for remote learning, so "anything that delays their return to classroom delivery is frustrating".

Corrina Hembury, managing director of Access Training (East Midlands) Ltd, also expressed frustration. "We provide training for around 700 apprentices and 50 study programme learners aged 16 to 19 at our sites in Nottingham and Derby and, along with many other providers, our cohort includes high levels of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners that are more likely to be affected by Covid-19 so it is unfair that they are being doubly disadvantaged by this lack of testing," she said.

Providers are encouraged in the DfE's guidance to use local asymptomatic testing sites until their kits arrive,

but "most of these are not easily accessible by public transport and therefore it is unlikely that many of our learners will be able to use them", Hembury said.

"We are therefore expected to deliver training without the additional reassurance of testing for both the learners and the staff."

The DfE said that to help ensure the safety of students and staff and minimise risk of outbreaks, providers should "continue implementing the system of controls".

A spokesperson claimed that while testing helps to identify people who are infectious but do not have coronavirus symptoms, the "system of controls involves a fuller set of actions that providers need to take to prevent and respond to any infection".

The system of controls includes ensuring face coverings are worn as well as other personal protective equipment where appropriate, promoting the "catch it, bin it, kill it" approach, keeping occupied spaces well ventilated, and maintaining social distancing.

The Association of Employment and Learning Providers described the delay to testing for their members as "madness". Chief executive Jane Hickie said: "This is another example of where the DfE seems to be treating work-based training programmes as an afterthought, even though the chancellor regards them as integral to the economic recovery.

"A depressing picture has emerged of apparent ministerial indifference to a part of the sector that is working closely with thousands of employers to generate new opportunities for unemployed young people and adults who may need to retrain."

She added: "The DfE has recognised that ITPs need home-testing kits for their staff and learners to ensure their safe return to face-to-face training, but we urgently require a delivery plan and the one which will be most effective will closely involve providers as the main point of distribution."



Jane Hickie

COLLEGE AND FE PROVIDER REOPENING PLAN

The March 8 return: what you need to know

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The Department for Education has published updated operational guidance detailing how colleges and providers should prepare for their wider reopening from March 8.

Here are the key points

COLLEGE STUDENTS NEED THREE COVID TESTS ONSITE...

Prime minister Boris Johnson told the House of Commons on Monday the return of secondary school and college students would be supported by ramped-up testing.

Colleges will now be expected to carry out three asymptomatic rapid onsite tests of their students between three and five days apart upon their return.

Individuals who test positive using the lateral flow devices will have to self-isolate, whereas those who test negative can attend classes.

Colleges will have the discretion to start testing students onsite before March 8.

...AND THEN MUST TEST TWICE-WEEKLY AT HOME

College students and staff will be provided with lateral flow device kits to test themselves twice a week at home.

They should report the result to NHS Test and Trace, as well as their provider, as soon as the test is completed.

Students aged under 17 have been advised to self-test and report with adult supervision.

Testing at home must not start until the week commencing March 15, the DfE has said, and colleges should have a small onsite testing area, so they can test students who are unable or unwilling to do it themselves at home. The DfE will be providing funding to support this.

DELAY TO TESTS FOR INDEPENDENT AND ADULT PROVIDERS

Controversially, independent training and adult community learning providers will not receive tests for use at home from the government until the end of March.



Staff attending their provider's site from March 8 have been pointed towards the asymptomatic testing opportunities being carried out by some local authorities, but this is not available to their students.

Independent and adult community providers will need to apply to the Department for Education for the number of Covid tests they need – but this process has not been set up yet.

PHASED RETURN

The Department for Education has confirmed colleges can phase in the return of students in the week of March 8 to allow for testing.

Guidance from the department reads: "Testing should start when students return" but it can also be staggered "to manage the number of students passing through the test site at any one time".

"Colleges have the flexibility to consider how best to deliver testing on a phased basis, depending on circumstances and local arrangements, but suggest vulnerable students are prioritised."

Testing is "voluntary, but encouraged," the guidance adds.



FLEXIBILITY FOR BLENDED LEARNING

It is the DfE's "expectation" that all 16-to-19-year-old learners undertake the "majority" of their planned hours on campus from March 8.

Adult learners "may also return onsite",

but the guidance does not provide any fixed expectation of how much of this should be on campus.

Providers can continue to deliver a mix of remote and onsite learning as they did during the autumn term. They "should continue to judge the right balance between onsite and remote delivery for students in order to provide high-quality education and training".

CLINICALLY EXTREMELY VULNERABLE STUDENTS SHOULD NOT RETURN ON MARCH 8

Students and staff with underlying health conditions who are thought to be at a very high risk of illness from coronavirus have been advised not to attend face-to-face tuition until at least March 31.

The government wrote to clinically extremely vulnerable people this month, advising them to continue to shield until the end of next month.

Students who live with someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable, but are not themselves, should still attend for face-to-face tuition, the DfE has said.

FACE COVERINGS TO BE WORN IN CLASSROOMS

The government is for the first time recommending face coverings should be worn by staff and students in classrooms and workshops. They will only be "required" where social distancing is not easy to maintain.

Previous guidance said face coverings should only be worn when individuals are moving around sites, in corridors and communal areas.

Exemptions apply for those who, for instance, cannot cover their face because of a physical impediment, disability, illness or mental health issue. And face coverings do not need to be worn by students outdoors, or when it would impact on exercise or strenuous activity.

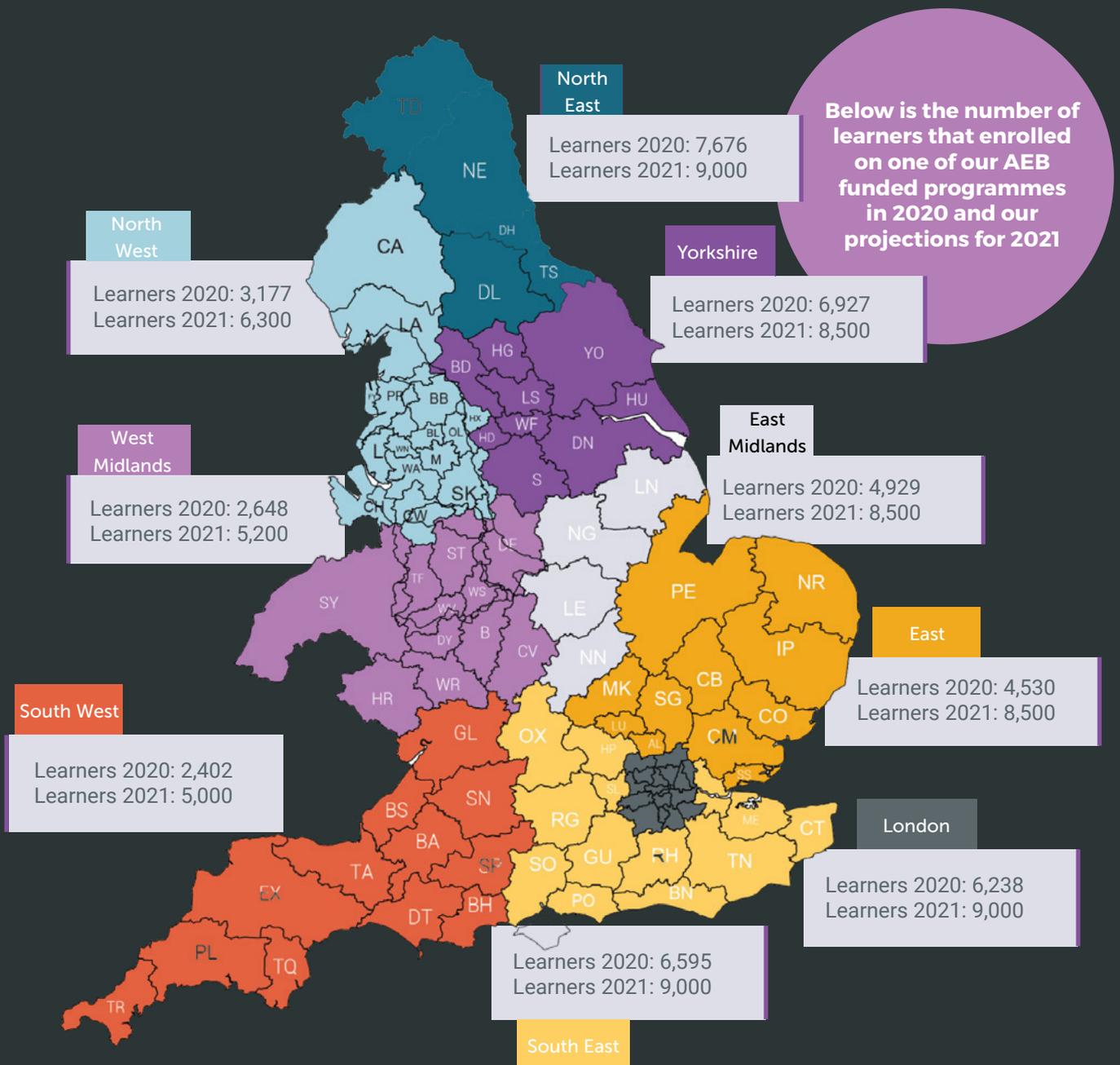
The government says wearing face coverings in classrooms will only be in the guidance until Easter, at which point they will review and update it.



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EXAMS AND ASSESSMENT 2021

Final decisions made on GCSE and A-level grading

SAMANTHA BOOTH NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

The government has confirmed its plans for replacing GCSE and A-level exams this summer, with teacher assessments due to be used to give students their grades. Here's what you need to know.

TEACHER ASSESSMENT GRADES, WITH OPTIONAL 'QUESTIONS' FROM EXAM BOARDS

The government has confirmed it is to press ahead with its plan to use teacher assessment to issue grades this year, and has stressed that unlike last year, there will be "no algorithm".

Ministers have also promised that students will only be assessed on "what they have been taught", in recognition of the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on learning.

Exam boards will provide detailed guidance on how to make grade judgments by the end of the spring term, and will also publish "optional" assessment materials by Easter.

The government said teachers could use a "range of evidence", including mock exam results, coursework, or other work completed as part of a pupil's course, "such as essays or in-class" tests, to arrive at their judgments.

Teachers will then have until June 18 to submit their students' grades, to allow "as much teaching time as possible" before assessments are made.

'FLEXIBLE' ASSESSMENT APPROACH

Teachers will have flexibility on whether and how they use optional questions set by

exam boards, some of which will be based on past papers and others that will be previously unseen.

Questions will be released for all subjects, likely by topic area, and they do not have to be sat in exam conditions.

The government recommends that if assessments are used, whole classes sit the same ones so teachers can compare between individuals.

RESULTS IN AUGUST, NOT JULY

The government's consultation suggested results would "most likely" be issued in early July after the quality assurance process.



However, this has been pushed back by a month, with A-levels results due on August 10 and GCSEs on August 12. Quality assurance will still take place before the end of term.

The DfE said this approach offers "additional time for appeals to be completed".

ANOTHER AUTUMN EXAM SERIES

For those students who want a further chance to improve on their teacher assessment grades, the government is expected to announce that a full autumn exam series will be held for the second year in a row.

QUALITY ASSURANCE COULD TRIGGER EXAM BOARD 'VISITS'

The grading process will be subject to three stages of external quality assurance.

First, schools and colleges will have to send exam boards their internal quality assurance processes, which will be checked.

The boards will then conduct sample, random checks of evidence over June and July across a range of different schools and colleges.

APPEALS WILL GO TO SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES FIRST

The government has confirmed its plan set out in the consultation which will allow students who believe their teacher had made an error in their grades to appeal to their school or college in the first instance.

Then, if students want to take it further, exam boards will review both the provider's processes and the evidence used to determine a student's grade to confirm whether the grade was a "reasonable exercise of academic judgement".

Where the student disagrees with the final result issued by the exam board after the appeal, and believes the process has not been followed correctly, an application can be made to Ofqual's Exams Procedures Review Service.

There is no threshold for students to apply, but the grade can go up or down as in normal appeals.

The DfE has said students will not have to pay for appeals, and at this stage they do not believe schools and colleges will have to pay either.

STUDENTS WON'T KNOW GRADES BEFORE SUBMISSION

As set out in the consultation, teachers will not be able to tell students' their final grade before results days.

Exam board OCR had suggested in its response to the consultation that rules forbidding schools and colleges from telling learners their grades should be dropped this year to prevent "sudden surprises" and reduce appeals.

But the government has said that although teachers should have a dialogue with students about the evidence that will inform their grade, they can't tell them the grade itself.



EXAMS AND ASSESSMENT 2021

How BTEC and other vocational grades will be awarded this year

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The government has outlined its final decisions for awarding BTEC and other vocational and technical qualification (VTQ) grades this summer.

Following a consultation that ran last month and received just over 3,000 responses, the plans are very similar to the arrangements adopted last year when exams were cancelled.

Awarding VTQs will again be based on three "broad" groups:

- **Group 1:** those that are most like GCSEs and A-levels
- **Group 2:** those that are used for direct entry into employment
- **Group 3:** those not like GCSEs or A-levels but are used for progression

Ofqual said it will provide, as it did last year, an online tool that sets out which individual qualifications sit in each category.

Here are the key things you need to know.

TEACHER-ASSESSED GRADES FOR GROUP 1

For VTQs that are most like GCSEs and A-levels, such as many BTECs and Cambridge Nationals/

Technicals, exams will not go ahead.

Instead, teacher-assessed grades will be used, based on a range of assessment, including coursework, mock exams and internal assessments.

Awarding bodies will issue guidance to providers and colleges about exactly what evidence is needed for teacher-assessed grades and timelines for information to be submitted from February 25.

ASSESSMENTS TO GO AHEAD FOR GROUP 2

VTQs that are used for direct entry into



employment and demonstrate occupational or professional competence will see their assessments go ahead as planned in a "Covid-secure way".

The government says that "alternative arrangements" cannot be used to assess a learner's competence, so their assessment must be delayed and taken at a later date if it cannot be sat at the time scheduled. This might occur in cases where a learner's practical training has been disrupted by the pandemic.

Subject areas commonly found in this group include construction, accounting, plumbing and automotive.

FUNCTIONAL SKILLS WIN: TEACHER-ASSESSED GRADES FOR GROUP 3 IF EXAMS CANNOT BE TAKEN

Assessments for VTQs that are unlike GCSEs and A-levels but are still used for progression, such as functional skills and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), should still go ahead in a Covid-secure way or remotely.

If neither of those options is possible then "alternative arrangements" can be used, namely teacher-assessed grades.

Again, individual awarding bodies will set out what evidence is needed in such cases, from February 25.

This marks a victory for providers, who have been battling the government to make this decision since September.

As previously reported by *FE Week*, thousands of learners, particularly apprentices, have been stuck in limbo and unable to complete their programme due to Covid-19 stopping them from sitting their functional skills tests.

The issue lies mostly with those in healthcare settings, such as nursing homes, who have not been able to attend their provider's site to sit the exam.

Teacher-assessed grades can now be given to learners unable to take



the assessment since September 2020 right through to the end of the 2020/21 academic year.

FE Week understands learners who receive their results through this route will be able to do so from April. But questions remain over how many will be in line to receive teacher-assessed grades as many remote proctoring solutions are now being rolled out and lockdown restrictions eased.

WHAT ABOUT T LEVELS?

Teacher-assessed grades will be used for T Level core components this summer.

This is a change from what was proposed in the consultation, which said the assessments should be delayed until the autumn.

The government said the decision to use teacher-assessed grades avoids putting too much pressure on students by delaying assessment until the second year of study.



WHEN WILL STUDENTS RECEIVE THEIR RESULTS?

Results for level 2 and 3 VTQs that are needed to secure college or university places will be issued on or before August 10 and 12, to align with GCSEs and A-levels.

But results for other VTQs, such as teacher-assessed grades for functional skills learners, will continue to be issued throughout the year as usual, but only from April.



APPEALS MUST GO THROUGH PROVIDERS

Ofqual said schools, colleges and other providers wishing to appeal a VTQ result on behalf of a student should "follow the process set out by the individual awarding organisation concerned".

The appeals process may differ for each awarding body.

'Bureaucratic' process for adding courses to level 3 lifetime skills guarantee offer slammed

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Exclusive

One of the country's largest manufacturing sectors has hit out at the "frustrating" and "bureaucratic" process of adding courses on to the level 3 lifetime skills guarantee offer.

The Food and Drink Federation (FDF) was left "puzzled" in December when their industry was one of many key economic sectors to be overlooked in the original list of 380 qualifications being offered to some adults aged 24 and above for free from April.

The federation, which represents around 900 employers, has since been lobbying for a number of food manufacturing courses to be added but has found the process "difficult".

Only mayoral combined authorities and awarding bodies can submit bids for qualifications to be added, and the Department for Education is only allowing applications every other month. The first was in January, which was too soon for FDF's bid to be ready, so they're having to wait until the end of March.

Mark Corbett, the federation's education and skills policy manager, told *FE Week* that food manufacturing "shouldn't have been in this position in the first place" as the sector, which employs nearly half a million people, is perfectly placed for people who have lost their jobs and want to retrain.

"We are one of the sectors that has kept the nation fed throughout the pandemic," Corbett said. "We were hailed by government as hidden heroes, but then for courses in our sector to be missed off, and then to be asked to go through this quite difficult process of getting courses added,

is disgruntling."

Industries such as hospitality, tourism and the media were left off the government list because they were deemed to be a low priority with low wages.

Corbett said there was "clearly something wrong" with the methodology adopted and claimed the DfE confuses food manufacturing with hospitality and catering. This led to the industry being omitted while the engineering and manufacturing technologies sectors were included, he added.

Explaining his experience of the application process so far, Corbett said: "It is very bureaucratic. As a trade association we are not allowed to submit any application to get courses added.

"We have pulled together different stakeholders and created a working group. We're currently pulling together all the courses we think should be added and align our application together to submit it through mayoral combined authorities and make this case as strong as possible."

He continued: "We have to make a case for the number of learners we expect to have, how we will support the local economy – is it part of local skills plans and the industrial strategy.



Mark Corbett

"We are a national sector so to have that regional criteria are a bit frustrating."

Corbett said the situation is additionally frustrating because last month's Skills for Jobs white paper "sold itself as putting employers at the centre to influence the skills system and yet employers do not have any role in this current system of getting courses added".

The level 3 courses chosen by the DfE will be fully funded for adults aged 24 and above without a full qualification at level 3 – equivalent to two full A-levels. The policy will be rolled out from April, funded by the National Skills Fund.

At the time the list was unveiled, the department said it had chosen qualifications that were "valued by employers".

Defending the process for adding courses, a DfE spokesperson said: "The process for suggesting additional qualifications to include in the level 3 adult offer is based on existing and well-understood processes.

"We encourage these organisations [mayoral combined authorities and awarding bodies] to work with employers and put forward their suggestions, to ensure the offer provides people with chance to gain the skills they need to get ahead.

"We have been engaging with sector representatives – including those from the food and drink manufacturing sector – since the publication of the qualifications list in December and will continue to do so."

The new offer builds on a similar policy that has been in place since 2013. It allows adults up to the age of 23 to be fully funded for their first full-level 3 qualification from the adult education budget. Those aged 24 and over have since had to take out an advanced learner loan to pay for the course.

College handed emergency cash as merger hits a second delay

FRASER WHIELDON
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Exclusive

An embattled sixth-form college being propped up by a £3 million bailout has seen its merger delayed for a second time.

Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College in Stockport was originally due to join Trafford College Group last August, before this was pushed back to October after coronavirus delayed the due diligence process.

The college has now told *FE Week* the merger date has been delayed a further six months to May 2021.

Chair Alison Hewitt said “significant” progress has been made, but the change “was deemed prudent, given the ongoing work required to ensure the merger at a time of unprecedented upheaval”.

The extended timeframe has also led to the need for emergency funding to keep the college afloat.

Cheadle and Marple’s latest accounts reveal the Education and Skills Funding Agency stumped up £750,000 at the end of 2020, which is being paid in instalments, so that it could pay the bills between January and March 2021.

This is on top of a £2.3 million emergency loan from the government, which has been received in tranches since July 2019, during which time the college has incurred restructuring costs, additional invoices related to the pandemic and had to prepare for the merger, Hewitt said.

The loan is due to be repaid by July 31 this year.

The period between December and March is when cash is most needed by colleges as that is when providers receive the lowest proportion of core funding, a Cheadle and Marple spokesperson told *FE Week*. They said that they receive about 20 per cent of their annual income in that time.



The spokesperson added that the college “should not require additional funds to meet its day-to-day obligations in relation to the May date for merger”.

Hewitt said the exceptional cash from the ESFA “reflects the difficult position that had developed in the past.

“The college’s operational performance is significantly improved and on an improving trend,” she added.

The college has been in formal intervention with the FE Commissioner since June 2019, and a report by Richard Atkins published in November 2019 revealed the college had asked the ESFA for emergency funding so it could meet staff salaries and other operating costs, because its cash was “exhausted”.

After it was handed a financial health notice to improve in July 2019, the commissioner’s report considered the college’s finances to be “terminal” due to “over-optimistic” forecasts, “seriously lacking” financial oversight and a £3 million deficit in 2018/19.

Its latest accounts show the college generated a £2.2 million deficit in 2019/20.

The FE Commissioner’s recommendations included a change in leadership “as soon as possible”, the board to work with the ESFA to ensure “short-term

stability”, and for governors to be trained in the insolvency regime.

The report also noted Cheadle and Marple was “relatively small and lacks the critical mass to be sustainable on a stand-alone basis”.

Hewitt said the college had met all the commissioner’s recommendations since the report and is “now confident of having achieved a stable financial position from which to move forward in a controlled manner and be able to meet its day-to-day cash requirements”.

In February 2020, former John Ruskin College principal Mohammed Ramzan was made transition principal and chief accounting officer for Cheadle and Marple.

Hewitt was appointed chair in October 2019, having previously served as vice chair.

And as part of cost-saving exercises the leadership team was cut from 14 to eight.

“With the collaborative and hugely supportive relationship with its merger partner, The Trafford College Group, Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College looks forward to a successful and sustainable future,” Hewitt said.

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KEITH SMITH

Director for post-16 strategy at the Department for Education

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East London UTC's future 'uncertain'

JESS STAUFENBERG
@STAUFENBERGJ

Exclusive

The future of another university technical college hangs in the balance despite receiving emergency funding.

East London UTC was slapped with its second financial notice to improve last month, after getting a £375,000 government bailout last year when it also chalked up a £1.8 million deficit.

Its latest accounts for 2019/20 show the Department for Education warned governors last month it was "minded not to approve" the 14-to-19 institution's requests to expand and take on students from age 11 in order to improve its sustainability.

"Although negotiations are continuing, the outcome of these is inherently uncertain," say the accounts, adding that without extra cash the UTC won't be able to "meet its liabilities".

The college is rated grade three by Ofsted and has 111 students on roll this year.

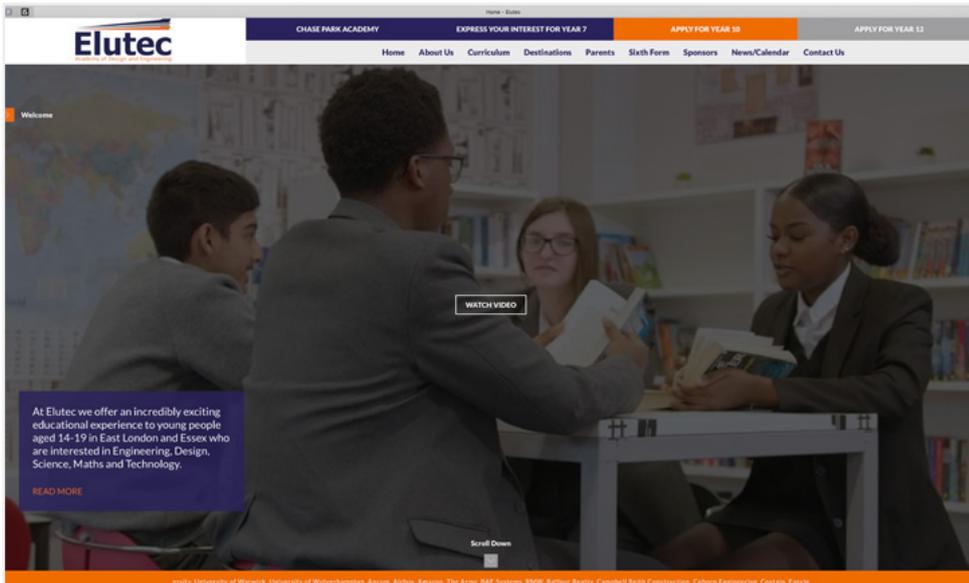
The situation raises the question as to whether the DfE would rather allow struggling UTCs without good Ofsted results go to the wall rather than change their business model.

Principal Kim Donovan told *FE Week* there were currently no plans for the East London UTC to close but declined to comment on the ongoing uncertainty over its future.

Eleven UTCs have closed since the first technical institutions were created by former education secretary Lord Baker in 2010.

East London UTC, which was first issued a financial notice in January last year before a second was published this month, hoped the DfE would agree to expand their starting age after it exited special measures in June 2019, say its accounts.

But "after making



enquiries on the level of support from DfE and ESFA", governors concluded it "does not have adequate resources to meet its liabilities [...] without further financial support from the ESFA or elsewhere".

Meanwhile, eight of the 48 UTCs across the country have received financial notices to improve, three of which have closed since.

Buckinghamshire UTC, whose financial notice was issued in 2016 and lifted the following year, also faces an uncertain future.

Its accounts reveal the Ofsted grade three institution recorded a £336,000 deficit last year, adding "the long-term financial sustainability of Bucks UTC depends ultimately" on increasing its 135 students through expanding the starting age to 11 or joining a multi-academy trust.

A proposal to join the Merchant Taylors Oxfordshire Academy Trust has been resubmitted after the DfE rejected the first application. The UTC did not respond to a request for comment.

David Robinson, director of post-16 and

skills at the Education Policy Institute, has said "one-on-one bespoke funding responses are not enough" to save the UTC model.

"In terms of the transition at 14, I don't think any amount of Baker Clause reinforcement is really going to save that," he added, referring to the legal duty on schools to make pupils aware of vocational study routes.

UTCs "either need to start from age 11, or at age 16".

Julian Gravatt, deputy chief executive of the Association of Colleges, told *FE Week* that "it might be better to transfer a UTC to a neighbouring college" rather than a multi-academy trust in some cases but this was currently "more difficult than it should be".

Meanwhile Simon Connell, chief executive of the Baker Dearing Educational Trust charity, which supports UTCs, said the "raised profile of employer-led technical education through the FE white paper" means "many high-quality MATs wish to have a UTC".

Twenty-three UTCs are in academy trusts, while four now start from age 11.

A DfE spokesperson said "strong UTCs" play an important role in skills education and it "continues to work with UTCs to address any individual challenges".



Simon Connell

Lost learning funds will include £102m extra for 16 to 19 tuition

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

The government has set aside an additional £102 million to extend the 16 to 19 tuition fund for an extra year.

Prime minister Boris Johnson and education secretary Gavin Williamson this week laid out their plan to help young people in England catch up on lost learning due to the pandemic.

They have pledged a new £700 million package, the majority of which will go towards primary and secondary school aged children (see table). The funding is in addition to the £1 billion catch-up fund announced last year.

FE colleges and providers that teach 16-to-19-year-olds are currently making use of a £96 million grant to provide small-group tutoring activity for disadvantaged students whose studies have been disrupted.

This will now be extended into next year, using £102 million of the £700 million. The Department for Education said this fund will “support more students in English, maths and other vocational and academic subjects”.

The same funding rules for the current tuition fund are set to apply in next year’s extension.

Colleges must opt in to receive the tuition fund money, which has so far been allocated at £150 for each student without a grade 4 pass in English and maths.

Although the DfE has said funding should be prioritised for those students who have not achieved a passing mark, grade 3, in GCSE English and maths, it can be used to support students who achieved grade 4 – meaning students who achieved grades 5 to 9 are not eligible.

A previous *FE Week* investigation found that colleges were making use of the funding to pay for more study staff, pastoral care and peer mentoring.

As announced earlier this month, former Education Endowment Foundation chief executive Kevan Collins is the government’s



Gavin Williamson

new education recovery commissioner, with a brief to advise on interventions to catch up the education of students aged up to 19.

Announcing the £700 million package, Williamson said: “Our package of measures will deliver vital support to the children and young people who need it most, making sure everyone has the same opportunity to fulfil their potential no matter their background.

“I know that longer-term support over the length of this parliament will be vital to ensure children make up for lost learning. Our Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, will be engaging with teachers, school and college leaders and families over the coming weeks and months to develop our longer-term plans.”

But Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said it was “frustrating” that the £700 million package has been “salami-sliced to such an extent that it may reduce its effectiveness”.

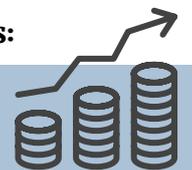
He added that the total sum of the money should go directly to schools, colleges, and early years providers, rather than being diverted into other pots or ring-fenced.

“By allocating a large sum of money to the National Tutoring Programme and apparently earmarking another large sum of money specifically for summer schools, there is less available to schools and colleges to use for catch-up support in general,” Barton said.

“The best way of ensuring that catch-up work is well-resourced is surely to maximise the amount of money available to providers to spend on the approaches that work best for their pupils.”

The new £700 million recovery package includes:

- A new one-off £302 million Recovery Premium for state primary and secondary schools, building on the Pupil Premium. The average primary school will receive around £6,000 extra, and the average secondary school around £22,000 extra. The DfE said this will help schools to bolster summer provision for their students, for example, laying on additional clubs and activities.
- £200 million will fund:
 - An £83 million expansion of the National Tutoring Programme for primary and secondary schools
 - A £102 million extension of the 16-19 Tuition Fund for a further year to support more students in English, maths and other vocational and academic subjects
 - £18m funding to support language development in the early years
- £200 million will be available to secondary schools to deliver face-to-face summer schools.



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'Amazing achievements': Winners of the AoC students of the year awards

FRASER WHIELDON
FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK

The "amazing" five winners of this year's Association of Colleges' Student of the Year Awards have been revealed.

Learners from across the country have been recognised for their "fantastic work at their colleges and local communities" at the virtual Colleges Live event, held on Wednesday.

Young student of the year was won by Stockport College's Esha Mumtaz, who went from a "silent" newcomer to her health and social care course to volunteering at Trafford General Hospital during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mumtaz earned paid employment at a care home after impressing during a placement, and travelled two hours by bus to and from the hospital, where she has prepared food, weighed patients and made beds.

Stockport's student engagement lead Michelle McLaughlin described Mumtaz as "a beacon for our college values," having displayed collaboration and teamwork on the college's equality council, professionalism in her approach to tasks and respect for others through her volunteering.

Apprentice of the year went to Matthew Moir from Loughborough College. The judges said he "rocketed through the ranks" at a Leicestershire primary school, where he has led classes, worked with children with special educational needs and disabilities and became a YouTube star during lockdown, with his channel helping people stay active at home.

The 19-year-old is now a permanent member of staff and is helping develop the school's approach to PE, leading lessons and sports clubs.

His award application said Matt has been "a role model amongst his peers, always

supporting classmates to develop their physical coaching skills, find solutions to challenges in their workplaces and helping them complete written assignments.

"From the start of his course, Matt pushed himself to develop and grow," they wrote, adding that he also won his college's internal apprentice of the year award.

Sam Beckett from Middlesbrough College and Scott Yarrington from Walsall College took the adult student of the year between them.

A deaf student who needs an interpreter, Sam has been an "ambassador for the college by showing how LGBT+ students with disabilities could achieve," his application reads, having passed his course before starting a mental health nursing degree in Manchester.

He has also volunteered at a day centre for the deaf for two years, helping young children with pastoral support and their schoolwork.

"Sam had to fight to get accepted on to the nursing course as health staff with such profound disabilities are rarely accepted," the application continues.

Yet he has not only excelled but also inspired his classmates to learn British Sign Language so they can communicate with him.

Yarrington, a former army lance corporal who lost his legs because of an explosive device in Afghanistan, won his award for his involvement with charity and his attitude to training.

Having left school at 16 with low literacy levels, and after spending two and half years learning to walk with prosthetic limbs, "education has become a priority for Scott," his application reads.

He is now training to be a public speaker and workshop facilitator in schools, conferences and other events - in addition to his accountancy career goals.

"There is no doubt that Scott will succeed in everything he turns his hand to, due to his

THE FULL LIST OF WINNERS

YOUNG STUDENT OF THE YEAR
Winner: Esha Mumtaz, Trafford College Group
Runners-up: Halle Parker, Loughborough College and Grace Prestwood, Oldham College

APPRENTICE OF THE YEAR
Winner: Matthew Moir, Loughborough College
Runners-up: Pippa Culverwell, North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College

ADULT STUDENT OF THE YEAR
Winners: Sam Beckett, Middlesbrough College and Scott Yarrington, Walsall College
Runners-up: Imogen Gibbons, The Cornwall College Group

HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENT OF THE YEAR
Winner: Jonathan Morris, Walsall College
Runners-up: Daniel Jennings, Loughborough College and Courtney Pitt, Newcastle & Stafford Colleges Group (NSCG)

perseverance, strong work ethic, outgoing nature and positive outlook," his application reads.

Higher education student of the year went to Jonathan Morris, also from Walsall College, who has hemiplegia cerebral palsy and started attending "as a shy, anxious 16-year-old who thought a media career was impossible because of his disability and lack of confidence," his application reads.

However, he has since started a YouTube channel about disability and mental health awareness, which has been seen by 90,000 people, and has made "remarkable" progress on his higher national diploma, with a career as a filmmaker or editor firmly in his sights.

AoC president Sally Dicketts said: "It is particularly amazing to see the achievements in such a turbulent year and everyone has done amazingly well.



Esha Mumtaz



Matt Moir



Sam Beckett

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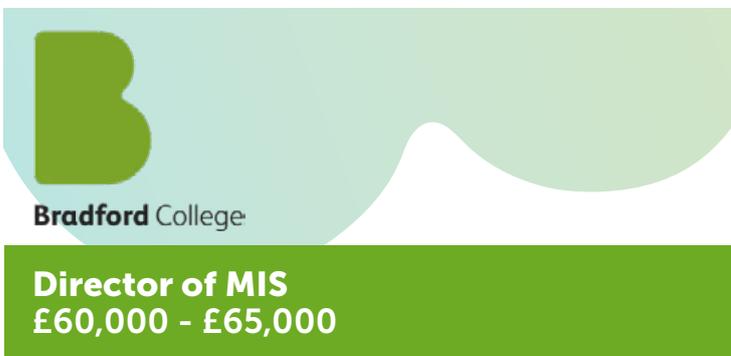
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Introducing
**DAVID
GALLAGHER**

CEO, NCFE

**'What I needed was a
mentor, to give me a
kick up the backside'**



JESS STAUFENBERG
@STAUFENBERGJ

David Gallagher tells Jess Staufenberg how he pulled back from the brink of a reckless life to focus on building progression routes

David Gallagher, chief executive of huge awarding organisation NCFE, got suspended three times during his A-levels. He can't remember why exactly for two of them, but he

does remember the third. He'd finished his exam paper very early, as usual had got bored, and so left.

"I was sitting in the exam, I'd finished the paper in half the time and I thought, I've done enough, so I walked out. The teachers weren't OK with that, I think that really annoyed them," he laughs, grinning ear to ear. The thing that seemed to frustrate the long-suffering staff was that no matter how few lessons the young Gallagher turned up to, or for how short a

time he sat down for an exam, he did pretty well. He says one of his college reports stated rather snidely: "David seems to revel in non-conformity, but no doubt his natural ability will get him through."

It's not unusual for maverick chief executives to be school tearaways, but it does make quite a nice symmetry that Gallagher, so close to being kicked out of formal education for quitting an exam, now heads up the country's oldest, and one of its biggest, exam boards. NCFE, once

Profile

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known as the Northern Council for Further Education until a name change in the 1990s, was the first awarding organisation with Pearson to be awarded contracts to deliver T Levels. The charity has been around for about 170 years and has access to some of the top tables for decision-making on vocational and technical qualifications around. It's also outside the London bubble, with headquarters in Newcastle, and appointed Middlesbrough lad Gallagher, who had only been with the organisation for seven months, to its top role about two years ago.

But although Gallagher tells his life story with the smiling charm of a true north-easterner, the disengagement – even, as he puts it, arrogance – needed to actually leave an exam tells a more serious story. The youngest of six siblings, Gallagher recalls his dad working away on rigs in the North Sea and his mum retraining hard as a social worker when he was little. “Parental responsibility” for Gallagher fell somewhere across them and his five siblings, and his earliest memories are everything from his mum teaching him the Periodic Table before he even went to school, and serving himself breakfast aged four because everyone was at work. “I learnt how to debate, how to fight, how to look after myself. I did what I wanted from a really early age. I’m pleased: I developed a really strong sense of independence and self-reliance.”

But that was out of step with school, where Gallagher makes an interesting observation I imagine would echo with many bright children not being properly stretched. He’d already



A young Gallagher on a climbing frame

taught himself to write from magazines – his ts and ds are still the wrong way round – and he read encyclopedias. “I never really felt like I needed teachers, I just needed work setting. What I needed was a mentor, not a stand-up teacher, someone who could give me a kick up the backside.” Aged 14, Gallagher was “totally fed up” with school. Then his beloved mum was diagnosed with a brain tumour. The tumour, which was the size of a grapefruit, was followed by a stroke. She was no longer able to work.

“Before my mum was ill, I’d been bored. But then when Mum was ill, I went off the rails.” He looks frankly into the camera. “I became an arrogant little shit, to be honest.” A decade later, aged 24, Gallagher sounds fairly lost. He had decided against university – certainly the right decision – and was working for BT, which he describes as

“brilliant”, although his work ethic still needed improving. But a self-destructive streak was getting the better of him. “I was a high-functioning lunatic, really. You’d have thought if you’d met me that I was normal, but my whole lifestyle was not conducive to relationships or work.” He says a “natural ability” to solve problems was getting him by, but he was out at night too much and getting into debt. Then a series of awful events happened in quick succession. He lost his job, a best friend’s dad he was close to died, his girlfriend’s mum died, and then his girlfriend dumped him. “It was a horrific period. I spent a lot of time



Gallagher celebrating his 40th birthday

looking in the mirror, and I didn’t like what I saw.”

It’s not often an education leader tells me guilt drove them into the sector, but Gallagher is refreshingly clear on this. “I thought, I want to be a decent human being again. It wasn’t wildly altruistic. It was almost like a penance thing. I thought, I’ve been shit for ten years. I want to make it up.”

“Education should be that great leveler”

The experience seems to have given Gallagher a great belief in training, in qualifying, in progressing. While trying to get himself back on the rails, he got a job as a “personal advisor” on New Labour’s Welfare to Work programme, helping those whose lives had careered completely off them, much more so than his own. These were people “with the most awful lives: abuse, neglect, in and out of prison, the care system, who’d lost parents, had cancer”, he says, adding the role was “somewhere between social worker and recruitment consultant...My experiences paled into insignificance.”



A young Gallagher

Profile

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Determined to do something but unable to progress in the role, his big break came when he was hired by Petrina Lynn, then-head of skills for the north-east at the Learning and Skills Council, the forerunner to today's ESFA. "I describe Petrina as my second mum. She was the matriarchal figure in my career who genuinely cared about me. I'd had bosses before, but that was the first time I worked for a real leader." He got his personal life sorted, and has worked with training providers and employment support organisations since.

"I thought, I want to be a decent human being again. It wasn't wildly altruistic"

But he didn't forget the frontline of working with those outside the system – people so much in need of support Gallagher had got into the habit of getting up two hours before work to "drag them out of bed" so they'd make their appointment with him. Some years later he was interviewing for a job at Working Links, a subcontracting company for employment services, and his boss-to-be asked him what one thing he would introduce.

"I said I'd love to get professional recognition for those on the frontline of Welfare to Work. I find it baffling people have to have a licence to fix my boiler, but there's no qualifications for people who can have a massive impact on someone sorting their life out." Quite extraordinarily, Gallagher set up today's Institute of Employability Professionals. Opened in 2011, it now has a level 2 qualification for frontline advisors, through to level 3 and level 4 for management, as well as an apprenticeship standard. "It's probably the thing I'm proudest of. It was a job that really mattered to me."

At NCFE, Gallagher has done a similar thing. He says when he first took the role, the organisation's purpose had become a bit unclear, as demonstrated by him gathering 13 senior leaders in a room to ask them why they did the job. "I got six different answers, and seven people who didn't know." So he launched a consultation across



Gallagher and his two sons

the company, and found a top priority for staff was feeling they were supporting and investing in educators. Gallagher has since convinced the board to pour half a million pounds into a "Centre of Excellence" developed with WorldSkills UK to "share best practice, CPD, masterclasses, even schemes of work and lesson plans". It's not a physical centre, but involves supporting staff in 20 colleges this year, with more next year.

Like the Institute of Employability Professionals, Gallagher seems happiest when he's seeing people gaining confidence and progressing on the ground. He's very excited about the world-class expertise that has been poured into T Levels – but deeply critical of a general rhetoric from government in which "the primacy and emphasis is only on technical skills", knowing from his own experience that a sense of purpose, confidence and joy is the real driver behind life change. I point out that no one in formal education was able to teach him that.

"But education should be that great leveller. If you don't have family, or life experiences, that build those characteristics, education should be the means through which you get that chance. That's where we still go wrong – and we need to get that right."



Gallagher with his family

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GINA PATEL

Productivity and skills lead, West Midlands Youth Combined Authority

JULIE NUGENT

Director of productivity and skills, West Midlands Combined Authority



Young people need to be involved in decision-making to build back better

Combined authorities and colleges working closely together can help reduce the risk of NEET young people, write Julie Nugent and Gina Patel

Since the pandemic emerged in the UK last year, the economy has taken an unprecedented hit. National unemployment now stands at five per cent, while one-fifth of people are not economically active or seeking work.

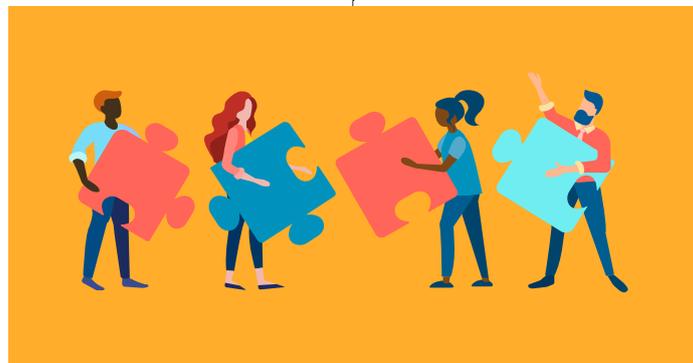
For many people, the government's furlough scheme has been a crucial life raft during this challenging time. However, what the future holds once this comes to an end is much less certain.

It is likely to mean even higher unemployment rates across many of our local areas. Armed with this knowledge, we have a duty of care to support the communities we serve.

It is one of the reasons we've been trying to innovate and provide robust solutions for young people, who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

In the West Midlands last month there were 169,835 claimants, either on unemployment benefits or those on universal credit or jobseeker's allowance – a staggering increase of 79 per cent from the same time last year.

Additionally, almost 7,000 16-to-17-year-olds were not in education, employment or training (NEET) in the West Midlands in 2020 – lower than the national average, but still a lot.



Experience tells us that the most effective solutions to addressing unemployment are those that reflect regional and local contexts, co-designed with employers and local partners.

A regional Jobs and Skills Board has allowed us to work with colleges, providers, local authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions to develop the best responses possible.

Importantly, these responses have been designed with young people, for young people. We know that our careers advice and FE engagement programmes will have much greater reach and uptake if we integrate the views and insights of those they are intended to support.

So last September at the West Midlands we set up a Young Combined Authority (YCA), which is a forum of approximately 30 young people aged between 16 and 25 who are representative of different backgrounds and experiences and can feed into wider policies.

It's still in its infancy, but we are developing a wider community of 100 young people to

drive wider outreach across the region.

It has helped to launch a new online platform, which is a one-stop-shop for young people to find training, employment and volunteering opportunities in their local area.

“The youth voice is an important piece of the puzzle for the country going forward”

Support for young people has been further bolstered following the Chancellor's announcement of the creation of Youth Hubs, as part of the “Plan for Jobs”, in July last year.

Physical “youth hubs” have been established across the region to engage more young people and give them access to localised advice and support, including support from a DWP work coach. These youth hubs provide co-located support

for young people in youth-friendly spaces such as Sandwell College.

During Covid-19, many of these have moved to providing support online through webinars, as well as supporting young people via text and email.

There are other initiatives that we think can add to a national blueprint of increasing employment and decreasing economic inactivity among younger people.

Strengthening the combined authority's connections with colleges and local authorities is important, to effectively track and reduce the number of those young people at risk of not being in employment, education or training.

This is achieved by working closely with colleges and their respective local authorities to share data on young people which helps identify those who are at risk of disengaging.

Colleges can then provide enhanced engagement and recruitment activities for specific students to ensure they start and stay on course.

The youth voice is an important piece of the puzzle for the country going forward. It should be amplified when decision-makers are thinking about jobs of the future, the Covid-19 economic recovery and employment support.

Creating the YCA forum, and linking it up with colleges, will help to make sure local employment and training initiatives can be regionally focused and more effective.

STEPHEN CORBETT

Head of school at the faculty of humanities and social sciences, University of Portsmouth



Research into FE staff wellbeing is now more important than ever

We need to rethink the implications of working from home, fewer social interactions, and more caring responsibilities, writes Stephen Corbett

The costs of the pandemic for the further education sector are at present largely unknown. FE institutions may already be able to identify the initial costs, such as the amount spent on PPE for health and safety procedures and on IT equipment. However, cost is not limited to the purchase of new equipment. There is the significant cost of staff wellbeing.

The FE workforce is engaging in activities far beyond anything ever expected before the pandemic. The pressure placed on staff at all levels is significant and further exacerbated by the limited time to ensure equipment, training and support could be put in place before lockdown hit.

Prior to the pandemic, we already knew that British teachers and educators reported the highest rates of work-related stress, depression and anxiety of all occupational groups in the country, according to Health and Safety Executive statistics.

Like the wider education sector, wellbeing in the FE workforce is lower than that of the general population. So it is vital that senior leaders are given the information and support to better understand the potential impact on their workforce. Otherwise it's very likely that workforce retention, organisational performance and



student experience will all go into decline.

As noted in the 2019 Ofsted report into wellbeing at work, lower levels of staff wellbeing can lead to a demotivated workforce, higher rates of staff sickness and poor staff retention, all of which impact negatively on the student experience. It is, therefore, rather unsurprising that Ofsted found 'outstanding' providers have the highest levels of staff wellbeing.

Leading voices in FE have sought to produce materials to make a difference. For example, the Association of Colleges' mental health and wellbeing charter seeks to create work environments that support mental health and promote wellbeing. The AoC also offers training and support for the sector.

Meanwhile, the Education and Training Foundation commissioned research into staff wellbeing in the sector, and put forward three important recommendations.

It firstly called for the supportive supervision of teachers (particularly those supporting students in difficult circumstances) to help them manage work-life

balance and student engagement and to share their experiences.

Secondly, the ETF recommended that senior leaders should review workload content with staff to reduce the number of hours needed to fulfil their job.

"It's very likely that workforce retention, performance and student experience could all go into decline"

And thirdly, employers should offer greater flexibility, such as working at home and uninterrupted administration days.

Unfortunately, the sector had insufficient time to fully consider this report. Three months after its publication the world experienced the global Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic does not mean that the fundamental need for research into wellbeing of the FE workforce has gone away. In fact, it is likely that it is needed now more than

ever. In part, this is illustrated by the government's pledge of the £8 million "wellbeing for education return" announced in summer for September 2020.

This initiative provides funding to local authorities, who are expected to use the funds to develop training for staff in schools and colleges to manage the emotional impact of the pandemic. But it won't solve the deep-rooted problems. The pandemic has wrought such changes in our professional and personal lives that we need to rethink the research. We need to consider the implications of working from home more frequently, diminished workplace social interactions, home schooling, caring responsibilities and more.

It is for this reason that academics at the University of Portsmouth are launching a new national survey of those working in the FE sector. This survey seeks to replicate previous research into work-life balance and wellbeing – but crucially, this time it will be done in the context of the pandemic.

This new research will seek to better understand the extent to which FE staff can balance work and non-work roles during Covid-19.

Have the boundaries between work and non-work roles become blurred? How is work-life balance managed? What is the impact upon the FE workforce's wellbeing?

These are the questions we hope to answer. Only then will the true cost of the pandemic be better known.

NEIL BENTLEY -GOCKMANN

Chief executive,
WorldSkills UK



Showing off the country's skills is missing from the International Education Strategy

International investors will only help us build back better if we show them the skillset of the local workforce, writes Neil Bentley-Gockmann

The launch of the government's updated "International Education Strategy" before the half-term break was very welcome. But there is a missed opportunity in it.

The strategy was updated to include the new Turing Scheme, through which young people will be supported to take up training opportunities overseas. This is good news as we have seen repeatedly the positive impact that periods of training in other countries can have for young people's confidence and future success.

So we welcome that our international competitions-based training programme is included in the qualifying criteria for funding.

The updated strategy also rightly seeks to boost export opportunities designed to leverage the quality of the UK offer to help improve the skills systems in other countries.

We are keen to leverage our WorldSkills global network in over 80 countries to support these discussions alongside our partners in the UK Skills Partnership, supported by the Department for International Trade.

But the strategy as it stands should do more to demonstrate the quality of skills being developed across the UK, to encourage international investors to finance new ventures here. This would align with the recent Skills for



Jobs white paper, which wants colleges and training providers to work more with employers and so recognises that skills quality and local economic development go hand in hand.

For example, Jaguar Land Rover's owners in India have recently announced the company will soon produce electric vehicles from its Midlands base. The skills and innovation ecosystem that surrounds their plants, including Warwickshire College Group and Warwick University, made this a good opportunity for more investment. Yet the opportunity to showcase skills quality of this kind is missing in the strategy.

This is despite management consultancy EY's annual "Attractiveness Survey", which assesses a country's appeal as an inward investment destination, repeatedly highlighting concerns about the UK's skills pipeline. In May 2020, EY's research showed the "skills of the workforce" was deemed more important by international investors than government support and infrastructure.

To help meet this challenge, we are working with partners in three new ways. EY's survey showed a clear investor interest in digital potential, so firstly we explored this in our report published in July last year, titled Answering the Call for Digital Skills Excellence.

We identified a geographic mismatch in the demand for, and supply of, high-quality digital skills. We are exploring this further with new evidence due next month and are planning further work to develop the clean tech and advanced manufacturing sectors.

"The skills of the workforce are more important for international investors than government support and infrastructure"

Secondly, we are continuing our work on benchmarking quality against other major global economies. In line with the priority countries set out in the

International Education Strategy, we are working on a number of new partnership deals with our WorldSkills peers in major economies, including in Asia Pacific.

These represent a commitment to share global best practice in skills development and enable us to bring innovation back home.

Thirdly, we are working to deliver more impact locally with clear demand from college leaders. Through our Centre of Excellence, which launched last year in partnership with awarding organisation NCFE, and our new Innovation Network, which we announced in January, we are working with some 160 partner institutions across the country.

The aim is to equip teachers with the knowledge to bring world-class standards and global best practice into the mainstream curriculum. This will support the development of over 40,000 young people and boost economic development.

By working on improving skills quality with our partners we are helping to realise the government's ambitions for recovery. We must improve the UK's credentials by exporting our skills know-how and showcasing our high-quality skills base to attract more long-term inward investment.

That's why we are keen to work with colleagues in government to make sure high-quality skills development is factored into the new International Education Strategy. It must become a core part of the UK's strategy for building back better.

SIMON ASHWORTH

Chief policy officer,
Association of Employment
and Learning Providers



Universal apprenticeship provider register reapplication has prompted dismay

The government should think carefully before taking a cliff edge, pass-fail approach to the register of apprenticeship training providers, writes Simon Ashworth

Although the FE white paper contained ideas that have stimulated positive debate, the refresh from April of the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers (RoATP) has prompted universal dismay and frustration across the sector.

We are still yet to see any coherent or logical argument from the ESFA about why a refresh needs to happen so soon after the last full refresh back in 2019 – and the fact that the RoATP has been closed to mainstream applications for nearly a whole year now.

The white paper describes the independent training provider landscape of approximately 1,250 organisations as “crowded” and “not always deliver[ing] high-quality provision”.

The reference to “crowded” clearly implies by default that the government has decided there are too many providers and therefore the refresh appears to have a baked-in objective of rationalising the choice of providers available to employers.

‘Unfair picture’

The claim that independent training providers (ITPs) do not always “deliver high-quality provision” also paints a rather opaque and unfair picture.

Year-on-year Ofsted’s annual report highlights that 75 to 80

per cent of ITPs deliver ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ provision, which puts them on a par with other types of providers.

Bearing in mind they are numerically the largest type by far, it’s odd that ITPs are singled out on this front in the white paper.

ITPs have led the roll-out of apprenticeships standards since the outset of the Richard review of apprenticeships reforms and this has not been an easy transition.

Other provider types have been slower to adopt standards and they may experience similar growing pains as they also move through that same process.

It is well documented that one in four new providers have been judged as making insufficient progress by Ofsted. We have the legacy of the first iteration of RoATP, where the entry criteria and the quality bar just were not robust or high enough. Some new providers then had to up their game or were managed out of the system.

‘Tighter regulatory position’

Iteration two of RoATP, which was a full refresh, was positioned by the ESFA as raising the bar, involving

more thorough testing of capacity and capability of providers wanting to deliver apprenticeship training.

The fact that we have another refresh and new criteria to “better determine whether providers have the capability and capacity to be able to deliver these higher-quality apprenticeships” implies the last process was far from a success.

In the latest guidance, the ESFA has pointed towards a tighter regulatory position where at some point providers need to provide more evidence about their capacity and expertise.

The ESFA is considering how this may be required beyond the initial application process, where providers wish to “expand their delivery to new areas”.

This is a strong hint of a move towards the approach we see with the register of end-point assessment organisations. It’s a move away from an open market for providers to deliver any of the 600 plus standards once on the RoATP.

If this is where the process does end up, the ESFA should avoid too much granularity. Instead, approval to deliver within occupational

sector subject areas rather than at individual standard level would form a happy medium.

‘Avoid cliff-edge outcome’

The recent update on how the agency will now measure the financial health of independent training providers sees the welcome inclusion of some pragmatic mitigations on both profitability and borrowing because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The financial health assessment has been a key facet in the RoATP process and we expect it to feature again this time around.

Last summer AELP alerted officials to concerns about the impact on short-term profitability due to the downturn in activity, and the need for many providers in the sector to utilise the government’s business loan facilities.

So the mitigations show that they have listened and taken this into account.

Before the guidance on the new criteria for RoATP approval is published, the government should avoid any cliff-edge in terms of the outcome.

The refresh itself is not a procurement exercise and therefore it needs to not just have a robust appeals process. The ESFA needs to operate the process pragmatically to enable providers to submit future evidence to support their application.

Yes, we want a healthy and high-quality training provider marketplace, but a binary and arbitrary approach to pass-fail is not what is needed here.



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READER'S REPLY

Re-apply – again! Anger as ESFA tells providers to make fresh RoATP application

Definitely needs reopening, but the refresher requirement is poorly timed, despite the phased approach. It will be interesting to see if they have capacity to manage the process effectively, given the current and forthcoming procurement activity. Fingers crossed...

Paul Butler, Twitter

The bureaucracy around running an apprenticeship is getting beyond a joke now.

Rebecca Sturman, Facebook

Shadow education secretary celebrates National Apprenticeship Week with 'top class' virtual tour

Great to see Kate Green and Toby Perkins both taking time to virtually visit Sue Pittock and see for themselves Remit Training's fantastic training facilities for apprentices during National Apprenticeship Week

Simon Ashworth, Twitter

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

Valid points made. Local/combined authorities must be involved, and many take a mix of applied general quals, and A-levels, which helps them decide.

Anne Milton, Twitter

Unions 'increasingly concerned' government will order full school and college reopening on March 8

To those who say educators do not want to work, I put it to you that remote/digital teaching has doubled/tripled our workload – planning for digital activities that inspire, educate and engage takes a long time, while of course, you are simultaneously learning the new software to do it. Educators want to go back to work (trust me, I would

REPLY OF THE WEEK

Re-apply – again! Anger as ESFA tells providers to make fresh RoATP application

Let's have a Friday analogy. "So, you passed your driving test four years ago, and you have no traffic offences or endorsements on your licence, despite road conditions being the worst they have ever been. So, we want you to take your driving test again." Marvellous.

Phillip, website

love to be face-to-face with my students, it's so much nicer, and easier) but I do not want to die in the process.

To the negative people out there on this – you go into an ill-ventilated room for six hours with young people who aren't wearing face masks, where staying one metre apart is an impossibility, see what it feels like, see what your thoughts are at the end of the day wondering if you "got it" today.

Gabrielle Hass, website

Pearson launches 'major' consultation into the future of exams amid calls for end to GCSEs

Could I request the expert panel add a few entrepreneurs and business owners who may be able to give an insight into where learners need to be when they arrive at their business as potential employees? This all looks loaded at one end, and not the other.

Richard David Willis, website

I totally agree with scrapping GCSEs altogether, it's not fair on children with different abilities to be all sitting an exam where they might not have a strong understanding of a certain subject compared to other children. I myself have four children. The older two are very competitive and academically headstrong. However, my third son is very laidback... and learns better through practical skills. Children need better teachers, who bring them out of their shells. Teachers are the best examples of examiners; they spend so much time with children and have a better understanding of the child's learning abilities.

Laila Ahmed, website

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Movers & Shakers

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



Jasmin Lewis

Assessment development manager, Construction EPA Company

Start date February 2021

Previous job

Healthcare partnership manager and product manager, Lifetime Training Group

Interesting fact

She has performed in a West End theatre production based on the Beatles



Dominic Gill

Chair of trustees, Ufi VocTech Trust

Start date February 2021

Concurrent job

Managing director, Intequal

Interesting fact

As an independent consultant, he previously developed and led Microsoft's Partner Apprenticeship Programme



Nick Lewis

Curriculum manager of automotive and engineering, City of Wolverhampton College

Start date December 2020

Previous job

Operations manager, Total People

Interesting fact

He won apprentice of the year on completing his automotive apprenticeship in 1998

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

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