

# **BUILD THE FUTURE**

## **NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP WEEK 2021**



**#NAW2021**  
**#BuildTheFuture**

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# Apprenticeships in a pandemic: A year like never before

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It has been a year like no other for apprenticeships which, like so many parts of the employment and training sector, have taken a substantial hit from the coronavirus pandemic.

Official Department for Education data shows there were 60,860 apprenticeship starts reported between 23 March (when the first lockdown started) and 31 July 2020 – a 46 per cent drop compared to the 111,570 reported for the same period the previous year. Figures also show there've been more than 3,000 apprentices made redundant since the start of 2020.

There are however signs of the drop in take-up easing, with latest quarterly data for the start of 2020/21 showing a less dramatic percentage fall. But serious challenges persist as we aim to enter the recovery period from Covid-19, for which

the government hopes that apprenticeships will play a key role in tackling unemployment.

That is why this year's National Apprenticeship Week was arguably more important than ever before. It gave ministers, employers, providers and apprentices the opportunity to remind everyone of this route into the world of work that can have a life-changing impact even in these testing times.

The theme for the week, now in its 14th year, 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 virtual events such as roundtable discussions and podcasts, and spreading the word through social media.

Throughout this supplement, sponsored by NCFE, we showcase some great examples of how the programmes have continued in the face of the pandemic.

First up on page 5 we hear from skills minister Gillian Keegan about the

government's reforms to apprenticeships and latest attempts to increase numbers, before shadow education secretary Kate Green lays out the measures Labour believes are needed to attract more people and employers.

From pages 7 to 12 we delve into how training and assessment has been adapted over the last year, as well as highlighting some of the events from the week, featuring the UK's "oldest apprentice".

It is then the turn of apprentices Amber James and Nigel Bennett (pages 14 to 15) to tell you their first-hand experience of their course, before we put a spotlight on one of the most experienced apprenticeship employer's on page 16.

Lastly, we hear from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education about the flexibilities they've introduced for training and assessment, some of which might stay for the long term, and from the sector's membership organisations about the challenges providers have had to overcome.

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# It's not about apprenticeships vs university - it's about the power of choice



**DAVID  
GALLAGHER**  
CEO, NCFE

Throughout my career, I've witnessed the power of lifelong learning many times over, whether that's been in a classroom, in a work environment, or just life in general. The deep belief that learning is the 'great leveller' is what drives the purpose of NCFE, to promote and advance learning, to create a fairer and more inclusive society through education. Unfortunately, I've also seen the challenge faced by those learners who haven't chosen or been able to take an academic route into their career or who haven't undertaken more traditional longer form qualifications.

During my time working in frontline delivery of employability programmes, to my more strategic roles in some of the largest training providers in the UK, I've seen the difference that vocational education and skills have made to the lives of thousands of individuals and the communities they live in. It's something that's always stuck with me, along with the drive to help find fairer ways for people to fulfil their potential through following the path in learning and life that is best suited to them.

I would like to note that I have absolute admiration for those who do have a degree, or any academic qualification for that matter. I applaud their commitment to study and that should be recognised and celebrated. What should also be valued though, are the many different ways that people can achieve and build knowledge, skills, and experiences, especially in such a rapidly changing labour market.

## Using HE as the ultimate benchmark

The attitude towards HE as the gateway to success has always been there but that approach stems from a time when going to university was for many an unattainable goal. There are now five times as many people with degrees as there were in the 1990s, thanks



to challenging inequality and widening participation. This access to higher education is fantastic but has led in a lot of instances to people and employers discounting the other equally valuable paths that a person might take into their career.

We can't ignore the fact that hands-on experience is just as important, and sometimes more important, than academic theory. Of course, we need our doctors, nurses, engineers etc to be highly trained academically, but we also want them to have that hands-on experience that is crucial for them to be able to succeed in their careers. What we do need to do though is to stop using those professions where a degree is absolutely essential as a benchmark for everything else.

## Careers advice to empower learners

I've thought a lot recently about careers advice in the context of how vocational education is perceived by people in terms of a routeway to a career. We need to centre our thinking differently and place emphasis not just on academic achievement, but on nurturing those meta skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, creativity, critical thinking and decision making. Those things are what will set people apart and mean that they have the

fundamental skills to achieve, no matter which path they choose.

## This isn't a binary issue

Finally, and most importantly, if we're going to change the thinking around the respective benefits of FE and HE, we need to stop pitting them against each other because they are both things which we should value equally for what they bring to society and the economy. There is so much crossover in vocational and academic learning and one can't really exist without the other, so we need to recognise this and nurture, develop and celebrate both in equal measure.

The amount of change and upheaval we've experienced over the past year shows us that we can change and adapt quickly to new ways of thinking. This could be a great time for employers to rip up the recruitment rule book when it comes to entry requirements, much like the HE and FE sector are having to do in light of exam cancellations.

We're on the verge of a real step change here and it's up to us to support employers to focus on what really matters in terms of creating an inclusive workplace - finding the right person for the job - degree or not.

You can find out more about our apprenticeships offer [here](#).

# Gillian Keegan

Apprenticeships  
and skills minister



## The research is clear - apprentices really are blazing a trail

**Government reforms mean apprenticeships today are longer and higher quality, writes Gillian Keegan**

For far too long, it has seemed like university was the only route to a great job, but that is simply not true.

The way we learn and the skills we need have changed dramatically. As we deal with the impact of an unprecedented global pandemic, build on the opportunities offered outside the EU, and take advantage of new developments in technology, we need to change the way we think about education.

**It is never  
too late to  
pursue your  
goals in life**



That's why I've been so delighted to celebrate the fantastic opportunities offered by apprenticeships during National Apprenticeships week – my first as minister for apprenticeships and skills.

Apprenticeships offer people of all ages and backgrounds the chance to learn new skills whilst earning a salary. They are also a highly effective, valuable way to keep up to date with the latest tech and knowledge employers need

to grow their business.

There are almost 600 apprenticeship opportunities available right up to master's level in a range of exciting industries, from space engineering to digital marketing, and from graphic design to data science.

Employers of all sizes continue to invest in apprenticeships including Amazon, Accenture, BT and the engineering partnership Troup Bywaters + Anders, making sure we have the skills and talent needed for today and the future.

Take Emilia, for example, an apprentice technician scientist at the University of Oxford who played a vital role in producing the UK's first Covid-19 vaccine to enter clinical trials.

She has now been offered a new three-year higher apprenticeship – level 5 technician scientist – to continue to take part in life-changing research and make her mark in this world.

I know first-hand that an apprenticeship can take you further than you could ever have imagined; the apprenticeship I started aged 16 in a car factory led me to working with businesses all over the world.

That's why I am so passionate about the opportunities apprenticeships offer, and I will continue to work with employers and the FE sector to ensure everyone no matter their age or background has the chance to get ahead.

The research is clear. Apprentices are really blazing a trail. Ninety-one per cent of apprentices were employed or pursuing further study in 2018 to 2019, and since 2010,

nearly five million people have started their apprenticeship journey.

It has been incredible to see apprenticeship ambassadors, MPs, training providers, apprentices, parents and employers coming together to champion the work being done across the apprenticeship community.

Throughout the week, I virtually met with apprentices who have continued to provide vital services and the employers of all sizes who have stepped up to the challenge during this unprecedented time.

I was thrilled to speak to apprentices from Amazon last Friday, who supported the flow of essential deliveries while we were staying home and protecting the NHS.

Thanks to our reforms, apprenticeships are now longer and higher quality, and we have taken steps to ensure apprentices learn the skills employers need to thrive at any age.

Take the amazing inspirational example of Bob Bryce, a ticket inspector from Luton who at the age of 76 decided to do an apprenticeship. It just goes to show it is never too late to pursue your goals in life.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on businesses up and down the country. That's why we have stepped in to offer employers of all sizes a cash boost of up to £2,000 to hire new apprentices, which is available until the end of March 2021.

We are supercharging our efforts on the skills front, making sure everyone can progress.

Our recently published Skills for Jobs white paper outlines our bold new plans on how we will put employers at the heart of our post-16 skills system, and apprenticeships are a vital part of this.

As we build back better, we want to ensure that everybody, whether a young person leaving school or someone looking to retrain, considers doing an apprenticeship.



# Kate Green

Shadow education minister



## The government must take note: urgent measures are needed

**There has never been a more important time to invest in creating new opportunities, says shadow education minister Kate Green**

National Apprenticeship Week is rightly an opportunity to celebrate those at the heart of our skills system and the thousands of individual successes achieved by apprentices, young and older, up and down the country.

This National Apprenticeships Week, I was delighted to join with colleges, independent training providers, employers and, most importantly, young people in celebrating the contribution apprenticeships make to our businesses and individuals' life chances.

Apprenticeships offer a unique combination of hands-on training and learning while apprentices earn and actively contribute to a business. This week, I virtually visited Remit Group in the East Midlands, getting the opportunity to see the brilliant facilities they provide for apprentices to learn and grow, and talking to an apprentice about what this opportunity means to them. The inspiration these young apprentices are getting out of their training was clear and shows how highly we should value the opportunities apprenticeships offer.

However, the pandemic has presented serious challenges for apprentices and, as with the wider economy, challenges which the government is failing to address sufficiently.

The Association of Employment and Learning Providers estimates there are around 60,000 apprentices stuck awaiting end-point assessments, unable to sit their functional skills tests and progress in their lives. This



requires urgent focus from the government to ensure that the pandemic is not putting these apprentices' lives on hold.

Apprentices have also struggled from the lack of digital access, suitable workspaces and training materials that are putting thousands of young people's educations at risk. While colleges have been able to access some funding and support for technology and to reduce class sizes, independent training providers have been ignored by government creating different experiences for apprentices across the country.

Most importantly, opportunities for people to start an apprenticeship are disappearing. Apprentice starts for quarter one are down over 25 per cent compared to the last academic year. The government's cash incentive, which the Chancellor announced under the promise

to create more apprenticeships, is failing, with less than one-fifth of the expected 100,000 new apprenticeships created. Simply extending the deadline for the incentive scheme to the end of March 2021, is not going to be enough to create the opportunities needed.

The government's failure to support apprenticeships runs further, across the civil service most government departments are missing the target for public sector bodies with 250 or more staff in England to employ 2.3% of their staff as new apprentice starts. This has been an ongoing trend since the target was introduced in 2017, with ministers failing to live up to its own standards.

Young people have borne the brunt of this pandemic, being the most likely to lose their jobs and the most likely to be furloughed. There has never been a more important time to invest in creating new opportunities, giving people the skills which our economy needs and using their abilities to rebuild after this pandemic.

Employers are clear that wages are the biggest barrier to creating new apprenticeships, which is why Labour has been calling on the government to put the underspend from the apprenticeships levy to good use and invest in a wage subsidy that would cover half the wages of 85,000 new apprentices age 16-24 this year. By tapering this subsidy over an apprentice's first year, from fully covering wage costs for the first three months, to 50 per cent for the next six and 25 per cent for the final three months, the subsidy would match the apprentice's learning, reducing as they gain skills and become more productive for their employers.

**Young people have borne the brunt of this pandemic** “

Apprenticeships present an incredible opportunity for young people to gain skills that will set them up for a career and provide employers with the skills our economy needs. The government has been quick to state its support for apprenticeships during the pandemic, but quick fixes are not enough. This must last beyond this crisis to providing colleges, training providers and employers with the long-term support they need to create opportunities for young people to rebuild from this pandemic.

# Lessons learned: the pros and cons of delivering training during Covid

**FRASER WHIELDON**  
**FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK**

**Through entire economic sectors being shut down, learners stuck at home and impossible pressures being hoisted on the sectors which stayed open, how has apprenticeship provision kept on going through Covid-19? FE Week spoke with apprentices, training providers and employers to understand what adjustments they have had to make**

Jill Whittaker, managing director of hospitality apprenticeship provider HIT Training, said there have been "pros and cons" to delivering during the pandemic.

One positive is the drive it gave them to switch to a blended learning approach: "We had been planning to move to that, because we found that it was working really well," she says. "We needed to move to a model that was more efficient with people's time."

**"It was a bit of a kind of trial and error, but all in all, it was good"**

"The way that we could do that is if we did interactive online workshops, a classroom model basically, but running online and interactively through various platforms."

This foresight came in handy when the first lockdown began, last March; as all of Whittaker's staff had already trained to deliver online, they were able to switch over with "minimal" problems.

"What was brilliant about it was that we didn't have to tell any of our employees that we couldn't still carry on working with the learners."



Naomi Hamilton

It meant early on they saw "very few" breaks in learning, with only one employer pulling their apprentices. This was because the employer had some apprentices placed with another provider, which had shut down, and the employer wanted to treat all their employees fairly.

James Walton, a 19-year-old apprentice maintenance engineer working for brick manufacturer Ibstock, said his training provider, Make UK, managed a "really quick" turnaround, producing online provision within a couple of weeks of lockdown. "It was a bit of a kind of trial and error, but all in all, it was good."

He said Make UK listened to learner feedback; so, for instance, when learners wanted to be able to see both their tutor and the work on their screens, the provider made it work, creating a classroom-esque experience.

Bricklaying apprentice Naomi Hamilton, 19, was another who found switching to virtual learning took a bit of adjusting to, saying she does enjoy online provision from Brooklands College, but "it is sometimes

a bit harder to understand what the teacher is trying to teach us".

As part of her job, Naomi regularly goes out on site and she gave an exhaustive list of the safety measures her employer, Lee Marley Brickwork, has laid out.

"There are a lot of one-way systems you have to follow; then for us to sign in and out, we have to use a machine and type our code in, so there's hand sanitiser, always before and after you use it. Even when we need to use the pens to sign a briefing sheet, they ask you to sanitise your hands after you've used the pen."

When everyone else returned to workplaces and in-person training in the summer, colleges such as City of Bristol found they had to rearrange their curriculum to make the most of having learners in class.

Bristol's assistant director of apprenticeships and work-based learning Geoffrey Iles said it was "great" for the learners and the staff to get back on campus, but the college had to front-load as much practical training as they could fit, in case of future lockdowns, and cut down classroom numbers; for instance, from around 18 to 12.

For some cohorts, Iles said they have also had to "flex" the curriculum, meaning apprentices may have one or two sessions one week, then be out of the classroom and studying from home the next week. This, he admitted, "has caused challenges, but in the same breath, we haven't got a choice".

Amy Parkinson, 19, an apprentice processing technician for French automotive company Akwell, who also trains with Make UK, said once she came back into the centre in August it was "very intense".

This was in order to fit in everything she needed to learn in year one of her course, which was intended to be



Stewart Hook

mostly practical, before the next cohort started in September.

Amy took this in her stride, saying she is looking forward to spending more time in work than in training, because: "It allows you to actually apply the things you've learned to your company."

While providers have managed to keep provision on track, many have been badly hit by a drop in apprenticeship starts.

Whittaker told FE Week her providers – including hospitality specialists HIT Training, care specialists Connect2Care and management trainers The Executive Development Network – are down by about one-third on this time last year. Though, she adds, that varies from closer to 40 per cent on hospitality courses, to 15 per cent on care, to increases in management training.

Neil Bates, managing director of Seetec Outsource, which offers apprenticeship in a range of sectors including the public services and transport, said: "We got hit hard in terms of apprenticeship starts, during the pandemic," but, he added: "We're beginning to see in the last quarter between January and March, a really solid recovery."

## **"We were able to do really quick risk assessments relating to the risk presented by Covid to learners and staff"**

Seetec Outsource, part of the larger Seetec group, was able to keep around 85 per cent of its provision up and running during the first lockdown, which Bates credits to their "emergency business continuity plan".

The plan organises gold, silver and bronze operational teams to coordinate across the business to keep the show on the road, but also to safeguard staff and learners.

"It meant we were able to do really quick risk assessments relating to the risk presented by Covid to learners and to our staff and to make the adjustments that we needed to make."

Stewart Hook, learning and development manager (GB) for construction materials company Breedon, which places large goods vehicle driver apprentices with

Seetec, showered praise on the provider, particularly the "fantastic" delivery coaches, who kept in contact with apprentices to ensure they are on track, and to check up on their wellbeing.

Hook also had some good news about employment, saying they recruited 20 apprentices in the past 12 months, only "slightly down" on their target.

In some cases, Covid-19 could see an uptick effect on recruitment: Health Education England, which supports the delivery of training in the NHS, says the service has seen "lots of people attracted into coming into the NHS," through such measures as UCAS applications for healthcare-related fields.

HEE's director of skills development and participation Laura Roberts said, based on conversations with employers about apprentice recruitment: "I have had absolutely no indication that numbers are down, and it feels quite a vibrant market at the moment."

The British Army, which last year was named the top apprentice employer in the country by the Department for Education, has also seen starts deflate, with head of learning and development operations Colonel Matt Ketterer saying they are currently at about 2,800, compared with about 4,500 last year.

But they have had another issue: during the pandemic, British soldiers have been deployed on a number of different tasks, including supporting testing and the vaccines roll-out and helping build the Nightingale hospitals.

What this has meant is soldiers from certain areas, such as infantry or artillery, have been deployed in areas not connected to their trade, so have been "heavily



James Walton

affected" by breaks in learning, the colonel said.

In 2019/20 they had around 1,250 breaks in learning; but this number has increased to around 1,900 so far this year.

"So we felt the effects," said Ketterer, adding that the army, providers and apprentices have had to be "agile and innovative" to adapt to constraints while continuing to operate within government guidelines on keeping learners safe, including the use of gloves, masks and training apprentices in bubbles.

One innovation that has been met with applause from the providers FE Week spoke with was the introduction of flexibilities for end-point assessments.

Since last March, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education has allowed apprentices' assessments to change to allow them to complete their programme while staying safe during the pandemic.

The flexibilities vary for each standard, but have involved conducting observations virtually, or replacing them with a "reflective statement" written by the apprentice, validated by an expert witness, and followed by 30 minutes of the apprentice answering questions.

Whittaker said the flexibilities had made a "huge difference," and Bates said it had meant apprentices had been able to complete their programmes.

Roberts said HEE's apprenticeships team have worked with trailblazer groups, employers and others to work out how flexibilities could work, and found they have been "really, really helpful". She even went so far as to suggest a future discussion of whether to take forward the model once the pandemic has passed.



Amy Parkinson

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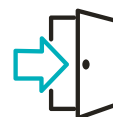
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# Highlights from **the week**

## Shadow education secretary celebrates with 'top class' virtual tour

Shadow education secretary Kate Green made her first visit, virtually, to an independent training provider to celebrate National Apprenticeship Week.

On Tuesday the Labour MP was joined by shadow apprenticeships minister Toby Perkins to meet midlands-based Remit Training which trains thousands of apprentices in automotive, IT, business, retail, food manufacturing, hospitality, care and management every year.

They spoke with Remit's chief executive Sue Pittock, senior account manager Andrew Murdoch, an apprentice, and were also treated to a virtual tour of two automotive training areas.

After the visit started at around 12pm, Green and Perkins saw over video, firstly, the provider's car-focused areas, including its spray paint booth.

At another of the provider's centres, the two were shown the area used to train

apprentices on heavy goods vehicles – which featured its very own inspection pit and two lorries.

Speaking during the tour, Green said: "We know that apprenticeships offer a great start for a young person, building a career. They give them a hands-on learning opportunity, the chance to earn and learn.

"So the top class companies

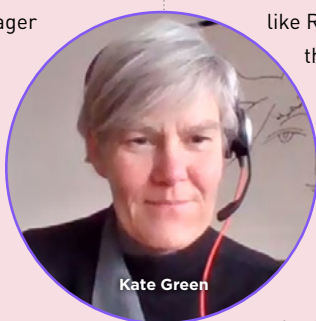
like Remit that support apprentices through their learning journey are going to be so important to our Covid recovery."

Green and Perkins also used the visit to discuss their proposal to subsidise 85,000 apprentices' wages in a year.

This would be funded through the £330 million apprenticeship levy underspend the Department for Education handed back to the Treasury in 2019.



Remit's heavy goods vehicle training area



Kate Green

Pittock warmly welcomed the proposal, calling it an "ideal answer," because:

"If somebody in government looks at it and says, 'what would I want for my own son or daughter or any other member of my family', you want them on an apprenticeship programme, you'd want the employer to have that subsidy, so they can say, 'no, I'm not just going to put them on a Kickstart programme that might only last six months and then they might not have a job'."

## UK's 'oldest apprentice' spreads the word

The UK's "oldest apprentice" took to the airwaves throughout the week to spread the word about the programme with a string of high-profile media appearances.

Bob Bryce, a 76-year-old revenue protection team leader for Govia Thameslink Railway, is studying a level 3 team supervisor apprenticeship and has appeared on Sky News, the BBC, Times Radio, on Jeremy Vine's show, and on vocational education champion Steph McGovern's Channel 4 programme.

Luton-based Bob did not seem too phased to be representing the nation's older apprentices, telling FE Week that he hoped his story of retraining could inspire people of all ages to consider apprenticeships.

"Even at 76, I don't feel past it. Anybody who does training, it gives them something to do to

keep themselves active," Bob says.

He has worked for Thameslink since 1999 and has been a team leader for the past decade, until "about two years ago this apprenticeship came up and all my colleagues who were team leaders were doing it, so I thought I had better do it".

He admits he was "hesitant" to do the apprenticeship at first "because of my age" and because he left school over 60 years ago without any qualifications. But he ploughed on and achieved equivalent to passes for GCSE English and maths.

"It's been hard work. Ok before the pandemic because you were in a classroom, but then you had to learn online, which was another learning curve," he said.

And although Covid-19 has slightly



Bob Bryce

delayed his training, he is now "on the home straight" with just his end-point assessment exam left to go. "I think I must be the oldest apprentice in the UK," Bob added.

# Highlights from the week

## Skills minister panel with apprentices who broke into male-dominated industries

Five young women set out their stall for improving apprenticeship take-up with skills minister Gillian Keegan during a virtual meeting.

The apprentices, who are ambassadors for apprenticeships through The Careers & Enterprise Company, represented key sectors across, engineering, manufacturing and public services and were keen to impress upon the minister how they 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.”

Serena Variah, an apprentice with Severn Trent in Derby, told the minister how her apprenticeship has provided her “with the qualifications you want

and put you one step ahead”.

“You get real support to learn and develop, so don’t be put off if you don’t feel experienced enough when you apply, you will learn lots once you start,” she added.

“It’s important to spread the word. I’ve been back to my school to talk about my experience and a group of girls came up to me afterwards to ask what apprenticeships

they could do and how to apply. It was really good to be able to explain it all to them from the point of view of someone who has done it and encourage them to do it.”

And Katie Rotherham, an engineering apprentice with Jacobs in Stockton-on-Tees, who now mentors young people thinking of choosing an apprenticeship, said: “I’d say to all young people they should consider apprenticeships. You get a lot of interesting work and responsibility straight away – together with great support.

“I get to work on big projects and with loads of different people. I want to help inspire young people, particularly young women like me, that there is a great career in engineering.”

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



Top row from left: Christine Hodgson, CEC chair; Serena Variah, apprentice Severn Trent. Middle row from left: Katie Rotherham, apprentice at Jacobs; Bintou Keita, apprentice at HS2; Elysia Moore, apprentice at Anglian Water. Bottom row from left: Zara Khan, apprentice at Walsall Council; minister Gillian Keegan

## Association launched to support trainees and boost retention

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 was formally launched during National Apprenticeship 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.

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 their 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”.

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

# A 'blunt instrument'? Roundtable debates the 20% 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 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 the 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."

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**AMBER  
JAMES****Former healthcare  
support worker  
apprentice**

# My apprenticeship took me to the frontline of the pandemic - and on to nursing

**An apprenticeship made me completely committed to working for the NHS, writes Amber James**

I began my journey as an apprentice at the world-renowned Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust (GOSH), in 2019. I was a healthcare support worker apprentice, which means I was being trained to provide high-quality, compassionate care for patients, including carrying out routine clinical duties like checking blood pressure or weight, and taking care of their comfort and wellbeing. This opportunity aged 24 years old enabled me to step into a healthcare environment and gain first-hand experience of being on the ward. At the same time as I was gaining an education, I also had the benefit of earning an income.

At GOSH, every day on the ward is an opportunity to learn something new. But one of the most significant things to happen during my time at the hospital – and truly across the whole of the NHS – is the Covid-19 pandemic.

It has changed how we work with each other and our patients. One thing that sticks out in my mind is around the emotional care that health care support workers like me provide.

Oftentimes we just make ourselves available to have a chat with the patients and their families. Things as simple as holding someone's hands when you're discussing something difficult or letting them see compassion in your face can make such a difference.

But throughout the pandemic we've been wearing PPE and taking extra care to protect everyone around us – so we had to come up with new ways of keeping that contact as human but safe as possible.

During my apprenticeship I also had the

privilege of being redeployed to London's NHS Nightingale Hospital at the ExCel centre during the pandemic. Redeployment was offered to any member of the trust who could offer a wide range of skills to help Covid-19 infected patients.

Although the patients in Nightingale were not children as I had been trained with, but adults, it was an opportunity to ensure that my skills were fully adaptable.

But working directly on the front line during a global pandemic comes with some really challenging moments. There is no doubt, and any colleague in the NHS would tell you, it puts additional stress on your body physically, mentally and emotionally. It's so easy to forget about yourself when you're worrying about the wellbeing of others, but it's so important not to.

**“For me, it was about finding opportunities within the crisis to grow”**

I also came to realise that all of the skills I had learned as an apprentice at GOSH were highly useful in any scenario. More importantly, I understood my skills were essential. They contributed to the emotional, physical and mental wellbeing of patients, while supporting the workload of my clinical colleagues in the busiest intensive treatment unit.

So it was after my experience as an apprentice that I decided to become a registered nurse. When the GOSH Learning Academy rolled out its new apprenticeship nursing degree In August 2020, I jumped at



the chance.

This nursing degree apprenticeship meant I could continue to work as a healthcare assistant, attend university and also earn an income.

As such it was the perfect opportunity to successfully become a registered nurse with the support of funding and without making too many personal sacrifices.

I would have never anticipated this career two years ago. At that point, I had been working in a children's centre, but I was frustrated by the lack of clear career progression.

Without the GOSH Learning Academy, my ward team and my family – and partly also the pandemic – I wouldn't have been so motivated to develop within the NHS.

For me, it was about finding opportunities within the crisis to grow. People often talk about growing pains, and I guess this is what they mean.

Allowing myself to be inspired by the incredible work of my GOSH family and the wider health service, not to mention the patients, has provided a constant source of motivation. I've wanted to succeed for them, and for me.



**NIGEL  
BENNETT**

Large goods vehicle  
driver apprentice

# Apprenticeships are the safest and fairest way for someone like me to change career

**It took a lot of courage to leave my job after 15 years and I couldn't have made such a success of it without an apprenticeship, writes Nigel Bennett**

Before I became an apprentice, I was in an emotionally stressful and exhausting job in a sector I had worked in for more than 15 years. It felt like it was time for a change. Most importantly I'd recently become a father, which had changed my outlook on the world and made me realise I did not want to pursue this path forever.

So, I decided to change career aged 40 while I was still young enough to offer a future employer a decent amount of my remaining working life. I wanted to pursue a career in something that I knew I could do - and importantly enjoy doing - which was driving.

I left my old job, pottered around applying for a variety of roles, until an apprenticeship opportunity came up with construction materials group Breedon, which had partnered with training provider Seetec.

Apprenticeships had always grabbed my attention, as they give you the opportunity to completely retrain in a new field and start from the bottom up.

The other alternatives were to find another career just by applying for jobs in areas of interest, but despite having years of work experience and transferable skills, this is difficult as you invariably have to compete with applicants who have experience in that field. You could also pay to retrain in a new skill, but then you may not pass it, or may not like once you start doing it.

Apprenticeships negate both of these hurdles and are the safest and fairest opportunity for the employee.

So when the chance for a level 2

large goods vehicle driver apprenticeship with Seetec came up, it caught my eye - it seemed perfect for what I was looking for.

During my apprenticeship with Breedon I've learned about many aspects of the construction and quarrying industry, both via classroom learning and practically.

I also visited many of our sites and met lots of very interesting people. The mentoring and classroom learning with my training provider was well managed and valuable, and Breedon were excellent at providing the practical learning and driving experience.

Fortunately, when the pandemic struck I had already completed my practical test and classroom learning, so all that remained was my end-point assessment.

This was managed virtually by Seetec, although it was slightly delayed from the original plan, which sadly slightly slowed down my completion. However the reduction in traffic on the roads during lockdowns was welcome!

Having the opportunity to do an apprenticeship has completely changed my life for the better. My work-life balance is much improved, I'm happy in my work again, I'm better paid and I'm much fitter

and healthier than I was, both physically and emotionally. I couldn't really have asked for it to turn out better.

My friends were surprised I was doing an apprenticeship and a well-paid apprenticeship at that, and now they are all quite interested.

**“Apprenticeships had always grabbed my attention, as they give you the opportunity to start from the bottom up”**

It took a lot of courage to leave the job I had been doing for 15 years without a job to go to. I was fortunate to find this apprenticeship - in many ways, it's the best thing I've ever done.

In the future I hope that more companies become aware of the benefits of

apprenticeships, and more people find out what a wonderful opportunity they are.

Previously they were looked down upon in favour of degrees, but the world has changed and I feel they really are the best opportunity for the employee.

Looking ahead, I'd like to remain with Breedon for as long as they'll have me, as they have invested in me greatly.

I may even not always be driving, as there are many opportunities within the company. I would like to have some role in the recruitment and training of future apprentices!



# 'We've been doing apprenticeships for 40 years. They're in our culture.'



**Employers have rarely faced tougher circumstances for taking on apprentices - particularly those in the travel industry. Jess Staufenberg speaks to one of the most experienced companies in the game about making it work**

Apprenticeships, like travel tourism in times of Covid, have gone through many ups and downs. This country has taken them seriously as a formal route for training for hundreds of years, with a law as far back as 1563 introducing a national apprenticeship system and vague minimum standards for practice. By the early 1900s there were about 340,000 apprentices a year but after peaking in the 1960s, apprenticeship numbers went into a slow decline into the mid-90s. Since then various initiatives tried to revive them, including "modern apprenticeships", "advanced apprenticeships" and more.

But while the country has been on a rollercoaster, Hays Travel focused on apprenticeships when it opened in 1980 and hasn't changed tack since. When apprenticeships halved between 1979 and 1995, founder John Hays and his wife, Dame Irene Hays, stuck to them. Last year their commitment was recognised at the Annual Apprenticeship Awards, run by FE Week and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, where they picked up the Employer of the Year award, and when Thomas Cook collapsed in September 2019, it was Hays Travel that stepped in, taking not only its former employees but its former apprentices too.

The trick seems to be to make them a fundamental pillar of the organisation. Apprenticeship delivery manager Carole Hodgson joined as an apprentice 33 years ago – as did, she

tells me, the current chief operating officer, marketing director and head of retail. An apprenticeship is a recognised route to the top within the business, which for a company with sales that have reached over £1 billion is a considerable career prospect. Because the apprenticeships have been tried and tested by generations, they have currency.

"Hays have been doing apprenticeships for years now, so it's in our organisation's culture," says Hodgson. "Apprenticeships have been at the forefront of us being successful. We want to grow our own, so they come to us, learn, and become part of the senior team." A staggering 41 per cent of head office managers at the company were former apprentices before the Thomas Cook acquisition.

But with the government's national minimum wage for apprentices set at only £4.15 per hour, less than the national

minimum wage for 16- to 17-year-olds of £4.55 – and vastly below the National Living Wage of £8.72 – why not take a job? Hays Travel would not disclose the salaries of its apprentices, but its apprentices are clear about the advantages over a full-time job.

Nirali Maru, a level 3 travel consultant apprentice, explains that "you get that extra someone holding your hand along the way. I think if I went into a junior role, I'd be expected to know much more than I do. But as an apprentice, you're allowed to shadow". Hodgson adds that an apprenticeship provides the learner with more options. "If I'd wanted a job elsewhere and hadn't done my apprenticeship, I wouldn't have a qualification showing that I've been recognised as competent [...] I would have nothing to prove that I'm good."

The other point to remember is how young many apprentices are. Tom Smetana, a level 3 travel consultant apprentice, found that his tourism and travel course at college offered a "slow-moving way of learning" and left after two months aged 16. "It was just a totally different learning experience here. We still do classroom-based training, but you can then go away and put it into practice." There are nods from the other apprentices, many of whom have a story to tell about education settings that didn't suit them. Eddison Reed-Brown, a level 2 finance assistant apprentice, left A-levels and was struggling to

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Carole Hodgson



Lauren Kent

## CONTINUED

find a job during lockdown, but last week began at Hays Travel and was “straight into training”.

And it's not just youngest recruits who emphasise the need for well-run apprenticeships. Maru, who started her apprenticeship aged 19, says neither her school nor college explained they were an option, leaving her mum to suggest the route after her two-year BTEC qualification in travel and tourism “didn't seem to matter” to employers. Maru found most bosses wanted one or two years' experience already. “If I'd known about apprenticeships, I would have definitely done this sooner.” Other former apprentices, such as Casey Earl, stumbled across the government's apprenticeships website. Apprenticeships are badly needed in an overcrowded labour market where employers are reluctant to take on those without practical experience. But it's clear many schools and colleges are still not promoting them.

Focusing on the young person in question also explains why Hays Travel try to ensure the apprentice is pursuing the right training for them. The company places many recruits in a “generic head office apprenticeship” to help them decide which department to train in for which City & Guilds qualification. There are four apprenticeships to choose from: the level 2 customer service practitioner, level 2 finance assistant apprenticeship (in partnership with Sunderland College for an accountancy qualification), the level 3 travel consultant apprenticeship and level 3 infrastructure technician apprenticeship. Apprentices do an 80 per cent role with 20 per cent training time. There is also a clear progression route: apprenticeships are followed by the “buddy mentor scheme” in which former apprentices learn how to coach new apprentices, then the “rising stars” scheme for team leaders, then manager and higher manager training courses. It's a clear line of sight from an apprenticeship to the top.

The pathway means Aaron Tanner, a former apprentice who now consistently hits the



company's “high-flyer” sales targets, can look ahead with ambition. “Later on this year, I'd like to buddy a colleague, move onto ‘rising stars’ and go into management from there,” he explains. He applied to Hays Travel via work experience in year 10. It seems the best apprenticeships have routes on either side of them, both to help people move into them and then to the next step afterwards.

**If I'd known about apprenticeships, I would have definitely done this sooner**



But it has not all been plain sailing at Hays Travel. Apprentices joining in the last two years have seen the company through some of its most successful and difficult periods. In 2019,

the Thomas Cook takeover heroically saved 555 shops and more than 2,000 jobs. Others were saved too, including Maru who had been a Thomas Cook apprentice for only two weeks when the company collapsed and Hays Travel took her on instead.

But since then, the global pandemic has stalled international travel, and the company revealed in summer it was having to cut up to 878 jobs out of 4,500, and then last month said 89 shops were shutting. Very sadly, John Hays, who had founded the company from the back of his mother's dress shop in Sunderland, also died in November last year. Amid the turbulence, there are now only 109 apprentices at the company where there would usually be more than 250.

But the apprentices are impressively optimistic, talking about the extra independent working skills they've gained, not to mention sales talk. “At the moment it's harder to persuade the customer to rebook their holiday, instead of cancel,” said Emily Peggs, who has finished her level 3 travel consultant apprenticeship. “It's about trying to persuade them with your selling skills.” Katie England, a level 3 travel consultant apprentice, explains that Lauren Kent, one of the company's learning and development coaches, checks in regularly with them. Bethany Meir, another former apprentice, adds that the pandemic situation has been a chance to “prove you can do it from home in the circumstances”.

Amid all the different trends around apprenticeships, Hays Travel have quietly been sticking to their principles for 40 years and are now a model of good practice to employers. Chair Irene Hays, who is also a non-executive board member at the Education and Skills Funding Agency, has her work cut out tackling the pandemic. But it is noticeable how loyal her new apprentices are to the company already – and that must count for something.



Katie England



Aaron Tanner



**JENNIFER  
COUPLAND**

Chief executive, the Institute for  
Apprenticeships and Technical  
Education (the Institute)

# Flexible training and assessment through lockdown and beyond

**The Institute took swift action in January to extend our flexibilities for over 130 apprenticeships to allow for high-quality remote assessment. None of them will be withdrawn before the end of August, says Jennifer Coupland**

It is wonderful to have this opportunity to talk to the sector during National Apprenticeship Week 2021. It's always a great time for celebrating the incredible achievements of apprentices, employers and providers. But it's more important than ever, this year, to talk about all the hard work that's keeping the programme going through this terrible pandemic.

Thousands of businesses are still running wonderful apprenticeships. And providers and employers have come together in all sorts of creative ways to make training and assessment possible remotely.

There is no point pretending that Covid-19 has not been traumatic for the entire country. Apprenticeships have of course been badly hit. The number of people starting on them halved during the first national lockdown. There were encouraging signs of bounce-back last summer and autumn, but we will have to wait and see what the impact of this latest lockdown will be.

Sectors worst impacted by lockdown, such as catering and hospitality, are obviously struggling more than others. In comparison, care services need new recruits more than ever.

Rest assured the Institute is doing everything we possibly can to help. We have worked hard with sector bodies, employers and providers to find solutions that allow assessment to continue amid the restrictions on movement and interaction.

It has resulted in our flexibilities for over 130 apprenticeships that mostly allow for high-quality remote rather than face-to-face assessment. We took swift action in January, following the launch of the



third national lockdown, by extending these flexibilities. None of them will be withdrawn before the end of August.

We did this to provide stability to providers, end-point assessment organisations (EPAOs), employers and apprentices. The last thing they need in these most trying of circumstances is to worry about us changing rules and regulations that we know have helped keep the system going and supported many apprentices to complete their apprenticeship.

It is an ongoing process. For example, the hair professional apprenticeship already has flexibilities in place, but we launched a new taskforce in January to look at what more can be done to support EPA during lockdown after speaking with employers.

We are also very happy to look at introducing flexibilities for apprenticeships that do not yet have them. There is guidance on our website for how employers, providers, and EPAOs can tell us where there is a need to do this.

Looking ahead to what will happen with existing flexibilities, we are investigating those with low take-up to understand why this is the case. Some flexibilities will be retained, where it becomes clear that they are an

improvement.

For example, there have been cases where the EPA is strengthened through aligning to an established professional and regulated competency test.

We announced plans to align around 30 apprenticeships last October – mostly for the health and science occupational route – and others will be added.

The Institute is also considering those that will not amount to an improvement beyond the pandemic and assessing when it could be right to remove them.

As I explained above, we are taking a steady and measured approach to this, in line with the decision to extend all flexibilities to August.

We will be surveying employers and wider sectors to see how well or otherwise all our flexibilities are working.

The coming months will not be easy, but apprenticeships have full backing from the government as set out in the white paper to lead the way with supporting recovery when the time comes.

The programme of flexibilities will be kept under review in the meantime and we will continue to work collaboratively across the board to support and improve how training and assessment is delivered.



**JANE  
HICKIE**

Chief executive of the  
Association of Employment  
and Learning Providers

# Providers have come through extremely serious apprenticeship challenges

## Jane Hickie reflects on a chaotic year of apprenticeship delivery for independent training providers

The fact that apprenticeship starts have halved during the pandemic speaks for itself in terms of the challenges facing providers. But this only tells part of the story. The other huge part has been keeping existing apprentices on a programme when they haven't been able to go into work. Some of those apprentices will no doubt be featuring in the online National Apprenticeship Week showcases and I look forward very much to hearing their stories.

Ministers were quick to seize on the results of an AELP member survey last April showing that early into the first lockdown, an extraordinary 81 per cent of current apprentices were still actively learning after providers executed an incredible overnight switch to online learning and assessment resources. In fact, it seemed to suggest to them that worrying about their flagship skills programme and the providers who delivered it was the least of their problems.

But reading back through the AELP press releases in that period, the challenges were extremely serious. On 1st April, we reported that one provider had already had to lay off 52 of its 81 staff. After the government's laptop and devices initiative of the last eight weeks, it is worth recalling that another provider also commented at that time: "We can't operate our traineeship or study programmes. They are disadvantaged learners four times more likely to be on free school meals. It has proven almost impossible to implement digital learning when they live on the breadline. We are keeping phone contact but they are unable to attend work placements or engage in meaningful learning". This was last April! But those disadvantaged learners were

being supported by an independent training provider, so they didn't count. It is no wonder that AELP and its members had to consult lawyers and embark on a mass lobbying campaign, taken up by other ministers, to eventually persuade the DfE that a limited form of provider relief should be introduced for providers of non-levy apprenticeships.

## "Getting apprenticeships back on track will play a vital part in the recovery effort"

As the year went on, significant volumes of apprentices who were due to complete apprenticeships within their originally planned timeframes suffered unfortunate delays because of the pandemic. By the autumn, the lower number of apprentices completing their end-point assessment was very apparent and the massive logjam of thousands of apprentices unable to take their functional skills tests had started to accumulate. The number of apprentices going beyond their planned end dates has now grown rapidly to where it will soon account for up to 30 per cent of many providers' total learner cohorts.

The potential risk to apprentices by not supporting the additional time they need to achieve their goals is significant. As a result of the lockdown, apprentices are needing more support from their providers, some of which is pastoral in nature to keep them motivated, but also additional time to help them retain and regain learning and

prepare again for EPA, especially when facing different working scenarios. In its pre-Budget submission, AELP has called for an injection of additional catch-up funding to support the extension to apprentices' programmes, which should be funded centrally from the DfE budget rather than directly from employer levy accounts. The government should also specifically support apprentices who started before the March 2020 national lockdown as part of this.

On new apprenticeship starts, the chancellor made a genuine effort in last July's Plan for Jobs to stop their freefall with the introduction of financial incentives for employers but sadly these weren't enough to be a gamechanger. The launch of Kickstart with its more attractive wage subsidies has given employers a different option and AELP believes that apprenticeships for young people should be put on an equitable footing. Progression is key and so the government should allow a Kickstarter to transfer from their work placement to an apprenticeship while enabling the employer to access any remaining six-month wage subsidy. Despite the encouraging news about vaccinations, we are still in the midst of a major recession and getting apprenticeships back on track will play a vital part in the recovery effort.





**TERESA  
FRITH**

Senior skills policy  
manager, the Association  
of Colleges

# Let's use this crisis to develop new alternative entry programmes

**If we are seeing a shift away from the role of apprenticeships in providing young people with a supported entry into work, then we need to ensure we have an alternative to offer, writes Teresa Frith**

All aspects of our lives have been touched by the pandemic. We have had to adjust and readjust and develop the 'new normal', so much so that the 'old normal' no longer feels like a place that we will ever get back to, and – in some areas – a place to which we might not want to return. The management and delivery of apprenticeships within colleges is no different from every other aspect of life.

Government has moved quite swiftly to try and minimise the impact of Covid-19 on the economy, particularly for jobs. This has had impact on apprenticeships, given that they are a job-based programme. Even with this support, we have seen unemployment figures rising rapidly and an unsurprising reluctance among employers to make the long-term commitment of employing a new apprentice in anywhere near the numbers needed to meet the demand from individuals aspiring to take their first step into employment via an apprenticeship.

For colleges, this shift coincides with

the removal of allocations to support apprenticeship delivery within non-levy organisations – the traditional way in which colleges have been funded to support all aspects of their communities. The volume drop is particularly marked when looking at the government statistics covering what is usually the most active quarter of the apprenticeship start year – August to October. This quarter in 2018/19 saw 132,000 total starts, with the comparative figures for 2019/20 being 125,800 and 2020/21 at 91,000. If we break this down into the 'entry level' part of the market, the drop is even more pronounced – and this entry part of the market is a strong element of the college apprenticeship offer.

Perhaps this shift is also indicative of what is happening in the wider economy and apprenticeship landscape. Since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, higher-level apprenticeships, and rule changes allowing delivery to over-25s and existing members of the workforce, we have seen significant shifts in the apprenticeship market. For colleges during the pandemic, this higher-level provision – which is an area where (particularly in STEM subjects) colleges deliver getting on for 50 per cent of apprenticeships – this work has not seen the same level of decline.

Regardless of whether you see the shifts as 'good' or 'bad' they cannot be ignored. If we are seeing a shift away from the role of apprenticeships in providing young people with a supported entry into work, then we will need to ensure that we have an alternative to offer. Demand for employment with training among young people has not dwindled, but access to suitable work opportunities is shrinking and is highly susceptible to shifts in the economy.

The pandemic has provided us with opportunities to swiftly innovate and develop new alternative entry programmes for those who cannot gain employment to undertake an

apprenticeship.

The good news story here is that the crisis has pushed us to recognise the value of the partnerships that can create swift and effective answers to the problem at hand. That is a partnership between government, employers and education to create working solutions.

**“I have felt first-hand how effective such collaboration can be”**

I have felt first-hand how effective such collaboration can be in the work that has been going on within the construction sector in the development of traineeships to create that 'plan B' route to employment for our young people. Most of us see an apprenticeship as being the very best way to achieve this, but this crisis has clearly shown us that we need to be more flexible and responsive.

We need to 'blur the lines' between further education and employment, create programmes that recognise variations in the economy and use them in a way that will allow young people to develop their skills, knowledge, behaviours and life chances regardless of whether there are employers ready to give them a chance right now or not. We need policy and funding from government to encourage employers and providers to create these solutions together.

If we can create effective partnerships, we can create effective learning in and out of work. Colleges are well positioned to work in partnership at a local level in support of employers and individuals both within apprenticeships and elsewhere.





**BRAD  
TOMBLING**

Head of customer  
success at training  
management  
platform Bud Systems

# Apprenticeship and training providers should be measuring learner happiness

**The sector has been guilty of being process-driven and linear, but now needs to put the learner's experience first, writes Brad Tombling**

On-the-job training such as apprenticeships are an essential vehicle to transporting thousands of young people to meaningful careers. The government's commitment to the future of apprenticeships, signalled in its FE white paper, reflects the value that apprenticeships bring to the workforce when delivered effectively.

The training industry has faced many challenges over the past 12 months and in an industry dependent on the successful outcome of its learners, never has learner happiness been more important.

Studies have shown that learners with a positive outlook retain more information.

Dr David Rock, co-founder of the Neuroleadership Institute in New York, explains that "people experiencing positive emotions perceive more options when trying to solve problems...and generally perform better overall".

The emotional state of a learner therefore needs to be a key consideration for training providers. Lester Biddle, technology director at apprenticeship provider HIT training, agrees. "Statistics have proved the more engaged the learner is, the more enjoyment they get from the learning and the higher degree of a successful outcome at the end."

The industry could be guilty in the past of being process-driven, and linear in its approach to a set curriculum. But the best way to raise the standard of apprenticeship delivery is to put the learner first, and that doesn't happen with a one-size-fits-all strategy.

Ian Bamford, chief operating officer at apprenticeship provider Paragon Skills, says

it's important to let the apprentice take the lead in their learning.

"Determining learner happiness not only relies on a clear framework for monitoring progression, but also the ability to enhance each individual's strengths by taking a holistic approach to their learning.

"By providing access to the latest digital learning, we are encouraging the apprentice to lead their own learning journey in a style that suits them. This gives them the autonomy to decide how they complete the curriculum with the reassuring support of their designated personal tutor. It's an approach that's high on engagement."

## "Taking a tailored approach to each learner nurtures their individual strengths"

Bamford adds that: "Our results are possibly a good indication that this approach works. Our latest inspection from Ofsted was good. We also have above average success rates across all sectors, which have increased year-on-year, for three successive years.

"We've also seen an impressive increase in our success rates since implementing this approach - with numbers rising from 67 per cent to 71 per cent in a single year."

Raising the levels of learner happiness and satisfaction in a tech-savvy generation depends on the following approaches.

First, today's apprentices are true digital natives and expect to consume products and services at any time and in any place.

A survey by Statista shows that 94 per cent of Generation Z regularly use a smartphone to access the internet. Accessing content via a smartphone is second nature to them, therefore apprenticeship delivery needs to be mobile-first.

Second, giving learners the digital tools and the autonomy to decide how they learn is an important aspect of engagement. Taking a tailored approach to each learner nurtures their individual strengths and growth in their learning journey.

Third, learner happiness and engagement should be a key metric for apprenticeship delivery. Employers and providers should build in interactive "personal development" activities to the online curriculum to track knowledge, skills and behaviour at regular intervals.

Finally, pause to listen. Track learner progress in real-time, rather than wait for coursework to be handed in late. Hold regular calls or Zoom meets to show that you value the learner experience. Invite learners to share their voices and experiences.

Kirsten Greenlees, managing partner at digital learning provider Decoded, explains how the company measures learner happiness.

"We take a data-driven approach, assessing hundreds of data points for every learner at different stages of the course. For example, after each workshop we see an average increase in the confidence of using a data analytics technique of 34 per cent.

"When monitoring feedback such as 'it's the most exciting thing I've done this past year', or 'it's opening up new opportunities and broadening my horizons', we're confident our approach to learner happiness leads to success with each and every learner."



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