



FE WEEK

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- New voluntary annual meeting between funding agency and college leadership
- FE commissioner team to participate but DfE insists it is not intervention
- Sector welcomes 'helpful' strategic conversations which are 'long overdue'

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Minister accused of misrepresenting new level 3 adult offer courses



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Minister accused of misrepresenting new level 3 adult offer courses

BILLY CAMDEN

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Exclusive

The skills minister stands accused of issuing misleading information about the new level 3 adult offer after FE Week analysis found the majority are too small to be classed as full level 3 qualifications.

Of the 387 courses included in the scheme for 24-year-old learners and above, 207 (53 per cent) are not in the existing 19-to-23 adult entitlement and are therefore not defined by the Department for Education as "full".

And of all the courses, 136 (35 per cent) are below an indicative 360 guided learning hours, according to the government's database of qualifications.

The "diploma in probation practice" from SFJ Awards for the public services sector is the smallest qualification, with just 60 guided learning hours, followed by the "certificate in understanding substance misuse" course offered by TQUK for the health and social care sector, which has 65 hours.

Another qualification for health and social care, the "certificate in peer support worker – theory and practice", offered by OCN NI, is the third smallest, with 85 guided learning hours.

Despite this, the DfE has repeatedly said the policy will enable eligible adults to achieve "their first full level 3 qualification" since prime minister Boris Johnson announced it last September.

In answer to multiple parliamentary questions, skills minister Gillian Keegan says the offer involves "fully funding adults' first full level 3 qualification".

And the DfE's webpage for the National Skills Fund, which will fund the new offer, says it will allow adults to "achieve their first full level 3 qualification".

Tom Bewick, chief executive of the Federation of Awarding Bodies, described this as "manifestly misleading", considering more than half of the qualifications are



Gillian Keegan

not full level 3s.

He said ministers "should know better" and added that if his members were communicating in this way they would "have the chief regulators' across the UK come down on them like a ton of bricks".

The DfE refused to comment on the claim that Keegan's and their own communication about this offer is misleading but did defend the inclusion of the 180 short courses that do not meet their "full" test.

"What matters the most is how this offer will help more adults to get ahead in the workplace or get a new job," a spokesperson said.

"All of the vocational and technical courses on offer have been identified as ones that can help adults progress in the labour market, regardless of whether they are included in the 19-to-23 legal entitlement and technically labelled a full level 3 or not."

They added that further information for providers will be set out in "due course", including details about how learners might be able to access a number of the shorter qualifications "without exhausting their eligibility".

The new level 3 adult offer is set to roll out in just two weeks' time. This is the first draft of the list, which is expected to expand over time as the government allows mayoral combined authorities and awarding bodies to make requests for other

qualifications to be added.

It builds on a similar policy that has been in place since 2013 which 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.

The current entitlement for those aged 23 and below spans 1,178 qualifications which are all classed as "full" level 3 courses.

FE Week's analysis shows that 180 (15 per cent) of them are being used in the new level 3 adult offer. The DfE has said the 207 shorter qualifications included in the new level 3 adult offer but which are not in the existing entitlement will be made available for 19-to-23 learners.

The new policy has been controversial since its announcement. FE Week was first to reveal that key economic sectors such as hospitality, tourism and media have been excluded as they were deemed a low priority with low wages.

Employers have since branded the process for adding qualifications to the list "bureaucratic" and "frustrating".

Independent training providers have meanwhile been given just a four-month window to start and complete the courses through the offer, while colleges have warned of a slow start owing to a lack of detail from the DfE and strict eligibility rules.

Bewick said that from the very start, "too much about the lifetime skills guarantee has been more about spin than substance".

"It's time to drop the propaganda slogans and adopt a more realistic approach about who and what this offer is for," he told FE Week.

"If they [the DfE] trusted learners and the sector more, we wouldn't need such a restrictive and nonsensical list. We'd give adults real entitlements to learning and let them decide. Instead, we have this bizarre situation where Whitehall is trying to second guess what the post-Covid labour market will do."



Tom Bewick

'Long overdue': Colleges welcome 'nurturing' conversations with ESFA

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From front

Exclusive

College leaders have endorsed a move by the Education and Skills Funding Agency to rebuild relationships with annual "strategic conversations".

The new meetings, which will get under way next month, have been described by principals as "helpful" and "much better than the current poor, reactive approach" taken by the ESFA.

David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, said the conversations will "help shift the focus in the agency away from the colleges they believe are in trouble to a more open discussion with all colleges".

Announcing the meetings on Wednesday, the ESFA said the idea followed Dame Mary Ney's review of financial oversight in colleges which recommended the agency builds a more "nurturing" relationship with the sector.

Ney's report, published in July 2020, warned that dealings with colleges had become "largely focused on financial failure, which inhibits colleges being transparent with government".

The ESFA said it will lead these new conversations, which must be attended by each college's leaders including the principal and chair as well as an FE Commissioner official. They will begin as the current FE Commissioner Richard Atkins leaves his post at the end of March.

The meetings will "look holistically at the college's strategy", according to the agency, and will focus on "current and future plans that the college has and provide us with an opportunity to hear directly from colleges about their successful initiatives, as well as discussing risks and challenges, and possible solutions".

The ESFA has insisted this is not

another form of intervention. A spokesperson said they will not be a funding requirement and they "do not expect" to publish the outcomes of individual conversations.

The first of these voluntary conversations will start in the summer term, from late April 2021, the ESFA said, with the first full cycle completed by May 2022.

Meetings will be held either at colleges or virtually, depending upon Covid-19 restrictions.

The ESFA said the content of the agenda will be "jointly shaped with each college, and as the programme rolls out, we will be in touch to agree a meeting date with each college and to agree the agenda".

Ian Pryce, chief executive of the Bedford College Group, said the meetings are "long overdue".

"Proper meetings, preferably visits in future, are much better than the current poor, reactive approach to monitoring," he added. "Relationships will improve, problems will be picked up earlier."

Luke Rake, principal of Kingston Maurward College in Dorset, said the move seems "entirely sensible to me and fully endorse this. Proactive and forward-thinking meetings to ensure good solutions for students is helpful."

Hughes said the meetings were a "good idea" as "we are keen to see more strategic engagement between ESFA and colleges, which ensures Dame Mary Ney's ambition of a nurturing relationship as well as a vehicle for colleges to highlight barriers they face due to

policy or funding rules".

He added that including the chair in the meetings "makes sense, particularly as ESFA promises to make these meetings a two-way sharing of information and to distil key messages so that they can improve policy making, rules and regulations".

John Laramy, principal at Exeter College, said: "I welcome the idea of a yearly 'strategic' conversation and hope this is the first step in forming a new partnership between colleges and the ESFA, as ultimately we all want the same thing brilliant colleges making a difference to individuals, businesses, our communities and ultimately UK plc."

And Sam Parrett, chief executive of London South East Education Group, added: "It can only help improve the sector if the key organisations involved in the oversight, regulation and operational leadership of colleges meet regularly to discuss the complexities and challenges involved in running colleges in these challenging times.

"Transparency is key to ensuring that there is a line of sight from the data that is submitted in a transactional and contractual relationship to the discussion that builds trust and confidence in the system leaders and ensures there is a supportive relationship between the ESFA and colleges."

The new conversations will involve all further education colleges, including specialist designated institutions, land-based colleges and sixth-form colleges.

Independent training providers are not included.

When asked why ITPs have been excluded, an ESFA spokesperson said: "ITPs by their nature are different from colleges, both in terms of their funding relationship with government and their business models.

"We are developing further our approach to working with ITPs and they continue to be a key part of the post-16 skills landscape."



THE ANNUAL REVALUATION OF FURTHER EDUCATION AND THE ENROLMENT PROCESS

Every year the further education sector spends an unlimited time working on Strategic Enrolment Management Plans.

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In 2020, the Covid-19 restrictions meant that FE colleges were forced into taking a new digital approach for their enrolment intake, a culture shift to the face-to-face interaction that the traditional method has to offer.

The digital experience has had both positive and negative outcomes. This year colleges will no doubt be assessing this before moving forwards. At the same time allowing, for the fact that the government roadmap may not effectively go to plan, and colleges may have to change the goalposts yet again.

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'All hell was breaking loose': How a cyber attack closed down a college

FRASER WHIELDON
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Exclusive

FE Week tells the inside story of the cyber attack that shut down one of Birmingham's major colleges, and finds out what others can do to protect themselves from similar threats

At around 3am last Saturday, an alert rang out around South and City College Birmingham's key staff and managers that the server had crashed.

The news reached principal Mike Hopkins later that morning, while he was training to cycle this year's Tour de France for the charity Cure Leukaemia.

"We went in to find out what's going on, to see all hell was breaking loose," he told FE Week.

He called it a "very high-level, automated" attack, committed through an unknown "backdoor" into their system. The college believes it had something to do with administrator's rights.

The hack was what is known as a ransomware attack – where criminals restrict access to computer services until the victim pays up – as it "effectively encrypted all our systems and files, everything".

This meant staff could not access services such as human resources and finance, so: "We've had to adopt alternative arrangements of systems to raise orders, pay bills, etc."

However, it has not affected the college's banking, and payroll has been adapted.

No ransom has been demanded yet, but Hopkins has been told the perpetrators usually demand £2 million in the cryptocurrency Bitcoin.

One of the first things they had to do was secure their computers from being infected, as "turning one on would have caused real difficulty".

SCCB is one of the biggest colleges in England, with eight campuses and centres across Birmingham, so it was a "weekend's job," Mike said, of staff racing around unplugging every machine.



Apart from that, there was "nothing at all we could do but shut down the college".

Without access to emails, social media was relied on to get the word out for its 13,000 students to not come to lessons on Monday morning and to stay at home for a week.

Online provision has been able to continue as the college can access Microsoft programmes such as Office and Teams, and now their emails.

This week, the college has called in IT security specialists IP Performance and education technology experts Jisc to establish what has happened.

Action Fraud, the National Cyber Security Centre, the Information Commissioner's Office and funding bodies have also been contacted.

The college is still not entirely sure how the hackers got in, and whether any information has been stolen. "The key to begin with," Mike said, "is making sure we get to the bottom of exactly what they've done where they have got into, and that you don't leave a backdoor in".

From Thursday, a number of students came back on to campus, including those on practical programmes, those who cannot access IT due to a language barrier and some vulnerable learners.

A full return to face-to-face provision may not happen for many weeks, Hopkins warned. The college is continuing to give students laptops and internet dongles to rent but will

be increasing the numbers of students back each week.

Hopkins praised neighbouring Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMet) for allowing SCCB to use its facilities for accountancy exams scheduled for this week.

"If anybody thinks that colleges can't and don't work collaboratively, here is one of the best examples you can possibly get that we do."

Hopkins is not sure when his college will return to "normal," as having asked this question on Tuesday, he was told "how long is a piece of string?"

Firstly, the college has to establish what has happened, and each of their "tens of thousands" of machines has to be checked for infection – this first stage is expected to take until Easter.

"It's an absolute pain in the backside with Covid," Hopkins said, and their onsite coronavirus testing centre had to be put on hold and students were instead sent testing kits to use at home.

However, as an experienced college leader, Hopkins refuses to be intimidated by the attack: "I have this fundamental view there's no such thing as insurmountable problems."

One downside is "I'm not sure there is

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anything to be learned from it," Mike said, as after having analysed attacks at other institutions "we thought we'd done everything that we could".

"But you can't stop everything because the very nature of the college is that we've got, like most colleges, an array where our staff and students can access their user areas remotely." He did, though, believe this attack was "different", owing to the possible use of administrator's rights.

"Covid, in some sense, has helped us because there has already been that massive shock to the system, so people are used to dealing with difference and are certainly used to working at home."

Colleges 'sometimes don't have a clue about their IT systems'

While Hopkins and his team were able to act quickly on their breach, other colleges have in the past been caught quite unprepared for a possible cyber attack.

Eighty per cent of further/higher education institutions identified a cyber security breach or attack in 2019, according to figures published by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Stefan Drew, a marketing consultant to colleges, with experience working on related IT systems, cites one college he worked with where the staff did not know where their server was: not IT, not marketing and not the web developer.

"I actually found it, in the end, in a basement of the college on a table. It was above the line where it had flooded a month or two before.

"That shows you how, really, people don't have a clue what's happening in their IT systems sometimes."

He puts this under-preparedness down to a lack of knowledge and accountability for colleges' computer systems.

For instance, there is a "naivety" among colleges that think they would be better off designing a website in-house, rather than commissioning a dedicated company.

So, "when somebody in the college designs this bit of software, with no experience whatsoever, it's designed with all the individual's idiosyncrasies. If they leave, someone looks at it and says: "I haven't got a clue what they did with this, let's start again"

Meanwhile, a website designed by professional developers will be regularly tested, including by so-called ethical hackers – who



Mike Hopkins

attempt to break into cyber systems to help inform the owner and others.

The plug-ins on a website, of which enquiry forms are examples, are also tested; but Drew warns that if these are not regularly updated after being installed, they can be used as a backdoor into a website.

"If you've got a backdoor into the website, the next question I ask is, what does that website connect to, and can that be a backdoor into other systems?"

Gathering data from the management information systems (MIS) is one risk he poses. A good example he found was where a college's website could read the MIS system, but as "read-only", so information cannot be sent out of the system.

Outdated software can also be a problem once a system has been hacked: another college Drew worked with was using a little-used content management system for its website, for which he could only find seven developers that could help if things went wrong. This means that the college "is over a barrel" paying for help if the website breaks. Plus, the system could be easier to hack into as it would be tested less frequently.

Furthermore, if servers are not backed up "regularly", he says, the data could become corrupted, or recent data could be lost if a back-up from before it was inputted needs to be used.

Drew recommends colleges have a process for checking their IT systems and for ensuring that process works as well. Penetration testing, where companies are hired to try and hack into systems on a regular basis, is also recommended as although it is "not that cheap, it's cheaper than having some hacker get in and hold the college to ransom".

TEN TIPS TO AVOID CYBER ATTACKS

To help colleges avoid falling victim to hackers, FE Week asked Midlands-based IT experts Infuse Technology for their top tips on preventing cyber attacks...

1. Define a starter process

Ensure that the appropriate and necessary permissions are granted for new employees and foster a culture of information security awareness.

2. Define a leaver process

This should include removal of all access rights in a timely manner for departing employees, including cloud access.

3. Patch your servers and PCs

'Patching' repairs a vulnerability or a flaw that is identified after the release of an application or software – they are intended to fix bugs or flaws that create security vulnerabilities.

4. Two-factor authentication (2FA)

Two-factor or multi-factor authentication requires users to provide a secondary form of verification in addition to a primary form, such as a fingerprint or one-time passcode, before accessing accounts.

5. Implement an effective disaster recovery strategy

Failure to prepare for the worst can lead to irreversible damage.

6. Utilise device management to safeguard sensitive data

Limiting access to devices that hold sensitive data can reduce the risk of a cyber attack. As part of this, appropriate staff training and preventative measures should be put in place.

7. Review data storage

Whether your data is stored manually on premises, or stored digitally in the cloud, ensure employees are storing and sharing data in a secure, confidential way.

8. Remove generic accounts

Eradicate generic accounts – whereby the password does not change, or multiple users have access.

9. Minimise access privileges to data

Review who holds login privileges, ensuring access is only granted to those who require it as a necessity.

10. Defend your email

Ninety-five per cent of threats infiltrate systems via email – one of the best defences in minimising such threats is by educating staff, ensuring they select strong passwords and know how to spot the signs of a phishing attack.

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SME starts cap to be reset to zero

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From front

The cap on apprenticeship starts for small employers will be reset to zero next month, the Education and Skills Funding Agency has announced.

It means that any non-levy-paying business can start up to ten new apprentices from April 1, 2021 regardless of the number they currently employ. The cap will be kept under review during the next financial year.

The move, revealed during Thursday's Association of Employment and Learning Providers spring conference, comes a week after an FE Week investigation found small employers were being blocked from new cash incentives for hiring apprentices after reaching the current limit.

AELP managing director Jane Hickie said the reset should be a "significant improvement" on the current situation but warned that without "transparency around levy funding, it's difficult for us to judge whether the ESFA has been unduly cautious on changing the cap arrangements".

Non-levy-paying businesses have been capped on the number of apprentices they can put through the digital apprenticeship service since January 2020 – starting with a limit of three before increasing to ten in July – to ensure the overall apprenticeships budget is not overspent.

The digital service was launched in April 2017 but was only for levy-paying employers to manage and spend their apprenticeship funding.

Small employers will fully transition on to the service next month, meaning that all apprenticeship starts must now go through the system rather than procured non-levy contracts held by training providers.

Announcing the cap reset, the ESFA's head of apprenticeship operations, Jason Poole, said: "The cap is there to help with the overall spend controls that we need to have in place for the

whole apprenticeship programme.

"As we've moved away from individual provider contracts, we still need a way to be able to monitor and manage the flow of funding.

"As we are now moving from the beginning of next month to have all new starts on the service, I am really pleased to confirm that from April 1, we will be resetting that total.

"There are quite a lot of employers now who have started to use those reservations and an increasing number that have got up to their limit of ten."

Apprentice "reservations" made by small employers before April which convert to starts beyond next month will not count in the new ten pot.

As Poole pointed out, the cap was first imposed owing to concern that the amount of money not being spent by levy payers wouldn't be enough if the government allowed small employers to have as many starts as they wanted.

But, as providers and employers told FE Week last week, in the past year starts have dropped dramatically across England because of the pandemic, and the overall apprenticeships budget is expected to be underspent this year.

Commenting on the cap reset, Hickie said: "This should be a significant improvement on the current situation. For some months, AELP has been pressing the government to act on the employer frustrations being relayed to us by apprenticeship providers and the announcement should relieve the pressure.

"Without transparency around levy funding, it's difficult for us to judge whether the ESFA has been unduly cautious on changing the cap arrangements but there is no doubt that previous limits looked strange against Rishi Sunak's measures to try and incentivise employers to offer more apprenticeship opportunities to young people.

"All the feedback suggests that the Plan for Jobs incentives will have by far the biggest impact among non-levy employers and so the changes make obvious sense."

Poole also announced during AELP's conference that the reservation period for employers who do not pay the apprenticeship levy is being extended from three to six months from April 1, 2021.

This means that these employers will be able to reserve funds up to six months before an apprenticeship is planned to start.



DfE knuckles rapped by stats watchdog over Skills Toolkit data

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The Office for Statistics Regulation has reprimanded the Department for Education over the data published for its new Skills Toolkit.

The body, an arm of the UK Statistics Authority, wrote to the DfE's chief statistician Neil Mclvor last week to raise issues with the figures.

OSR deputy director for regulation Mary Gregory expresses concern in the letter that the DfE is not clear that users of the toolkit could be coming from across the globe.

She also pulls the department up on its use of unpublished data about the Skills Toolkit

in multiple parliamentary questions.

The DfE has now agreed to implement a series of improvements in the data's publication and committed to following the statistics authority's "Code of Practice" through its publication of "experimental statistics". Compliance with the code is only a requirement for official statistics.

The letter follows multiple FE Week investigations which have led to the DfE admitting previous data claims were inaccurate.

Significant overcounting has led to revised estimates of "registration" claims in the published statistics which continue to include web hits and could be coming from anywhere in the world as the course providers do not filter for geographical locations.

Last week, FE Week also revealed how some course "completions" were being counted when users spent three minutes looking at one of the online resources.

The course content has not been developed by the government, but more than £1 million has been spent to develop and promote the skills toolkit "platform". It launched in April 2020 and consists of a web page on the National Careers Service with short course descriptions and links to the external websites.

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

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

The DfE now publishes

"experimental" Skills Toolkit data alongside its monthly apprenticeships and traineeships statistics release. The publication does point out the limitations of the data and makes clear that reporting of registrations and completions varies by each provider.

But it does not explain how the data for each course is counted, nor does it inform users of the geographical coverage.

Responding to the OSR's letter, a DfE spokesperson said: "The Skills Toolkit was set up in response to the pandemic to ensure people have the opportunity to learn new skills. Right from the beginning, we have been aware the providers that supply the courses apply different methods to collect and measure usage.

"For these reasons we have published 'experimental' statistics which reflects the need to publish data while we seek to develop them further as we establish what data our users need. We have been clear about the caveats and limitations of this data. The UK Statistics Authority provides this designation of 'experimental' for exactly those purposes."

The OSR says in its letter that the Skills Toolkit data is published under the "additional analysis section" of the publication which "may not be clear to users looking for these data in the release".

It also acknowledges that the section provides users with "some of the limitations of the Skills Toolkit data".

However, "not all limitations of the data are included. For example, they do not currently inform users of what the geographical coverage is," the letter reads. "It is important to clearly explain the relevant limitations of the data and statistics to aid user understanding, and these should be regularly reviewed as the statistics are developed."

The DfE spokesperson said they will implement "further improvements" to address these concerns in its next release.

Neil Mclvor
Chief Data Officer and Chief Statistician
Department for Education

8 March 2021

Dear Neil,

Use of unpublished data during Parliamentary Questions

I am writing to you regarding the use of unpublished data during Parliamentary Questions on 29 January around the DfE's Skills Toolkit. Thank you for the help your team has provided as we have been looking into this.

We welcome the inclusion of statistics on the Skills Toolkit as part of the Apprenticeships and Traineeships official statistics publication. This recognised the need for the orderly release of these data following the use of unpublished management information during a press release. It is positive that you sought to provide analytical support to the policy team that own the data.

However, there have been two separate instances of use of unpublished data on the DfE Skills Toolkit in response to Parliamentary Questions. The first was data on registrations quoted during a [Parliamentary Question in October 2020](#). We raised this with you and shared our view that the response should have drawn on the latest published data. You raised this with the policy team and the figures used have since been revised and updated.

The second related to a [Parliamentary Question in January 2021](#), where unpublished data on course completions were used. The data have since been published within the latest [Apprenticeship and Traineeship](#) official statistics publication.

Your team told us that it is working with officials in your department to ensure that in future where data are used in the public domain, you will follow the principles of the Code of Practice, in particular ensuring that sufficient methodological detail is available for readers to fully understand the figures.

As part of looking into these queries, we have looked at the Skills Toolkit data within the Apprenticeships and Traineeships publication. There are a number of limitations with the data, made clear in the publication, but we also identified some improvements we would like to see. For example:

- The data are published under the Additional Analysis section. This may not be clear to users looking for these data in the release.
- The notes provided under the Additional Analysis section provide users with some of the limitations of the Skills Toolkit data. However, not all limitations of the data are included for example they do not currently inform users of what the geographical coverage is. It is important to clearly explain the relevant limitations of the data and statistics to aid user understanding and these should be regularly reviewed as the statistics are developed.

My team would be happy to discuss the content of this letter with you or your team. I look forward to hearing about your plans for these statistics going forward.

Yours sincerely



Mary Gregory
Deputy Director for Regulation

The OSR's letter to the DfE

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Full Ofsted inspections will not resume until September

JAMES CARR
NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Full graded Ofsted inspections will not return until the new academic year, with the watchdog instead looking at bringing in a "sensible and proportionate next step" as part of its phased return in the summer term.

Department for Education guidance states routine, graded Ofsted inspections "will resume in the summer term", with the inspectorate "discussing the form and timing of inspections in the summer term".

However, chief inspector Amanda Spielman this week confirmed that full inspections will not be returning this academic year.

Addressing the Association of School and College Leaders virtual conference, she added: "But I can tell you that what we're discussing is a sensible and proportionate next step before returning to our normal inspection programme in the autumn."

Ofsted has been conducting a new form of remote monitoring inspections of schools and colleges graded 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' since January 25, after U-turning on plans to conduct inspections in-person.

But these visits for FE providers have now stopped so that the watchdog can focus on face-to-face

new provider monitoring inspections, which recommenced on Monday.

As more normal service resumes within education, Spielman said she wants Ofsted to "play its part in helping schools and colleges get back on track through inspections".

But she warned them against conducting "mocksteds", or using inspection consultants in a bid to prepare.

"I want us to help not hinder and I certainly don't want hard-pressed teachers spending time on fruitless exercises to prepare for Ofsted... Just do the best for your pupils and students, in other words, what you always do," she added.



Amanda Spielman

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More licences to practice would show England 'values' skills

FRASER WHIELDON
FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Exclusive

The lack of jobs in England which require a licence to practise shows the country does not place a high value on skills, a leading academic has said.

Lorna Unwin, professor emerita in vocational education at the UCL's Institute of Education, called for a "cultural shift" on the licences during an FE Week webcast on the Skills for Jobs white paper.

Unwin was discussing how England's vocational system could "beat" Germany's - which is a goal of education secretary Gavin Williamson.

She said most of England's politicians

"never mention" Germany's "regulated labour market" and called it a "huge stick and a carrot for employers to have a really good commitment to training", which involves a much wider use of licences to practise than in our system.

Licences to practise are where workers have to train and be certified at a standard set out by a professional body in order to fill a particular occupation, such as a doctor.

Unwin said England has "very, very, very" few licences to practise, which means: "I could set myself up as an electrician tomorrow, if I wanted to. I could certainly cut your hair and do toenails, with no training."

This, she said, showed "we don't value a lot of jobs, or we think that for lots of jobs you just need a bit of induction and you pick it up as you go along".

But Covid-19 had "exposed all of the

occupations that the country relies on to keep going, that people generally just dismiss".

Unwin said there needed to be a "cultural shift" around the licences, focusing on "to what extent we can develop the notion across more occupations".

Her comments come after education secretary Gavin Williamson promised in his speech to the Conservative Party conference in 2019 that England would "overtake Germany in the opportunities we offer to those studying technical routes by 2029".

Unwin proposed a pilot of licences to practise in some sectors, to figure out what they might look like and whether it could be linked to progression from level 3 up to level 5.

However, she did warn that it could create "bottlenecks" around entry into the labour market.

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 **SIMON LEBUS**
 Chief Regulator
 Ofqual
 Plenary one | Monday



 **RT HON. ROBERT HALFON MP**
 Chair
 Education Select Committee
 Plenary four | Thursday



 **GILLIAN KEEGAN MP**
 Apprenticeships Minister
 HM Gov - DfE
 Plenary one | Monday



 **HMCI AMANDA SPIELMAN**
 Chief Inspector
 Ofsted
 Plenary three | Wednesday



 **JENNIFER COUPLAND**
 CEO
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Testing times? Inside the reopening of colleges

JL DUTAUT
JL.DUTAUT@FEWEEK.CO.UK

An Herculean effort has seen colleges deploy mass Covid testing to support a safe reopening. So how did it go, and what does the future hold? JL Dutaut finds out

"I wasn't coping at home although my teachers really tried with me."

Our dominant image of vulnerable learners amid this pandemic may be of children and young people. But these words were spoken last week to Westminster Adult Education Services principal Arinola Edeh by one of her students.

Vulnerability has been revealed everywhere by this year-long crisis. Colleges have proven to be a vital safety net. That's why closing their doors again over two months ago was traumatic.



Arinola Edeh

Having welcomed students back once before, the picture of what was being inflicted on them was all the clearer.

However, this second round of closures has seen colleges drastically increase and improve their online learning provision. At Havant and South Downs College (HSDC), for example, principal Mike Gaston notes that training staff to facilitate live lessons has really paid off. "Teachers have expressed their gratitude for it," he tells me. "It reassured teachers that their students were making good progress and has meant the return to lessons at college has been seamless for many."

His students concur. With a caveat. "Live lessons during lockdown have been really varied and interesting," one said. "But it's much better learning with friends in class."

The feeling is shared across all the colleges I've spoken

with this week. Everyone is grateful for the technological innovations of the past 12 months. But they are even more grateful to be back on site. As Askham Bryan College, equine student Alicia Easdon put it quite literally, "I'm very ready to get back in the saddle!"

Animal management curriculum director Jo Richards tells me the horses are just as happy as Alicia. She and her colleagues, Fiona Macdonald and Iain Glendinning, are "over the moon" that students are back as the college literally comes back to life. The same phenomenon is happening at Bedford College Group's agricultural college. CEO, Ian Pryce tells me one member of staff said they were pleased to get students back "because the lambing needed doing!"

As Pryce says, "The buzz has returned to our campuses." Spring has clearly sprung, and there is perhaps no better analogy than that

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for the general joy of the past week. But the real reason this reopening feels different is perhaps the prime minister's insistence that there be no U-turns on his roadmap to Covid freedom.

Despite the work to make settings

“Some feel safer in their homes. We need to help them feel comfortable”

Covid-safe, another lockdown always felt somewhat inevitable in the summer and autumn terms. Now, with mass testing in place and a successful vaccination roll-out in progress, there is genuine optimism that the end is in sight. London South East Colleges CEO Sam Parrett echoes every principal I've spoken with when she tells me she hopes “we can all look forward to some stability and a return to our normal lives as we head towards summer”.

But the first thing to note is that this is still far from a full return. At Stanmore College, for example,



Sarbdip Noonan

principal Sarbdip Noonan tells me they “are continuing online learning for the rest of term to reduce footfall on campus. The plan is for 65 per cent of students to return on site.”

And beyond phased reopenings, leaders are dealing with students who can't attend and, more challengingly, some who won't. MidKent College principal, Simon Cook, whose community suffered one of the highest Covid rates in the UK in November says “that has changed the psychology for many, and some feel safer in their homes. We need to help them feel comfortable and be patient.”

For Dipa Ganguli, whose adult education college also caters for 16- to 19-year-olds, reopening hasn't happened at all. “Prior to the PM's announcement,” she says, “I had made a decision not to return on site until after the Easter holidays.” Staff at Sutton College are being tested weekly at the council's testing centre, but the college doesn't have the facility yet to test their learners.

Sutton College's example reflects nothing if not the diversity of the further education sector and the fairly unique trust placed in the sector's leaders to implement a locally led, safety-first reopening. For the vast majority, it has begun in earnest, supported

by a staggering logistical effort. “It's been no small feat,” says Leeds City College principal Suzanne Gallagher. “But by setting up mass testing, it has allowed us to identify a small number of cases and act quickly.”

Parrett's LSEC conducted 5,000 tests last week. NCG CEO Liz



Stanmore testing centre

Bromley tells me staff and student volunteers carried out 10,063 tests across the group's campuses. Pryce reports an average of close to 1,000 lateral flow tests (LFTs) a day. Education Partnership NorthEast carried out 3,000. Mike Gaston says HSDC conducted 7,000.

And not one college leader I've spoken to reports a hitch. Student engagement is high across the piece too. Cook says numbers over the past week show “the significant majority of students have chosen to take part, and we expect that number to rise as the testing process is demystified”.

But while the time it takes to realise this effort has been accounted for in the government's decision to allow colleges to determine the speed and extent of their reopening, it is unclear whether ministers have fully grasped the cost.

By and large, mass testing in colleges is being supported by an army of staff and student volunteers. For students, especially health and social care students who can tot it up as work experience, it's hard to see a down side to this civic engagement. But for staff, it's an additional role on top of managing increased on-site demand as well as ongoing remote provision. Workload implications mean potentially long-term costs in retention and recruitment.

In the main, the 'Big Society' approach is working. For MidKent, for example, one good turn has earned another. “One of our local



Newcastle Sixth Form gateway mass testing

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CONTINUED

hospital trusts has been using a part of our land for over a year," Cook tells me. "So they offered to help with staffing for the short period we need."

“Agency staff are brought in at a cost to carry out the actual testing”

But Liz Bromley tells me that NCG's London colleges – Lewisham and Southwark – have both had to rely on agency staff to support their test centre volunteers. The group hopes to recover some of the cost, but it's as yet unclear whether that will be possible. Stanmore College principal Sarbdip Noonan also reports that, while her staff and student volunteers control the queues, "agency staff are brought in at a cost to carry out the actual testing".

It's hard to know how widespread this hidden cost is, but it is clearly impacting unevenly.

What appears to be more evenly spread is the result of all this work. It's an unscientific sample for sure, but almost every leader who's touched on the subject



Newcastle Sixth Form sample results testing

of positive cases with me, regardless of region, has reported the same outcome – about one positive case in every 1,000 LFTs. The exception is LSEC where, Sam Parrett tells me, there have been 0 positives from 5,000 tests.

This has meant the return to classrooms itself has been able to

progress with little disruption. But sustaining that depends on one other key factor: compliance with guidance on face coverings that leave providers with no recourse to consequences.

Happily, all the leaders who spoke to me report high compliance. Gaston says his students feel "like stakeholders in avoiding any further disruption to face-to-face education". Liz Bromley acknowledges that "there are a very small number who are resistant. We just make sure that social distancing is in place. As long as the testing is happening, we are a little more confident that there is a very, very low risk of transmission."

All in all then, last week's reopening has been a nationwide success. And from this week, the demand on colleges will begin to lessen as students go home with self-test kits. The result is that "staff are generally very optimistic about the end of the academic year," says Noonan, echoing every leader I've spoken with.

But as Bromley explains, most don't expect "the real, genuine reopening" to be until September. Things will begin to look like normal, she hopes, but "even then I suspect there will be a new normal we'll have to get used to".

Not least among the challenges college leaders are anticipating is welcoming new students in the autumn. Cook, for example, is concerned that "we've not been able to welcome any prospective students to our campuses. We've done some great work



Volunteers at Sunderland College's City Campus

with online open events, but the transition this year could be slightly bumpier than normal."

For sure, the edtech revolution has helped and will continue to help. Edeh, whose college has so far only reopened for those on practical courses and entry-level students, is certain of that. "We don't expect to move all our provision online," she says, "but we have now seen its potential for establishing different delivery models."

“Transition this year could be slightly bumpier than normal”

But if the past week has brought one thing front and centre for everyone, it is, as Parrett says, "the importance of social contact for everyone's wellbeing".

The crucial role of colleges in supporting good mental health is a message all seem to agree with. And they do so with a depth of feeling that was perhaps lacking from this discussion in pre-pandemic times.

The past week has let that genie out of the bottle, and it doesn't look like there's any putting it back.

So saddle up. The ride into Covid's sunset promises to be an exciting one.



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JILL DUFFY

Chief executive, OCR



Overworked staff need clear guidance around teacher-assessed grades this year

Teachers don't need to provide cartloads of evidence, just enough to form a professional judgment, says Jill Duffy

It is widely agreed that teachers and college leaders are facing an unprecedented workload. Not only are you welcoming students back, identifying learning gaps and doing Covid testing, but results for your students taking key vocational qualifications (like our Cambridge Technicals) this summer will be based on teacher-assessed grades.

Time and again when we listen to teachers and their teacher associations workload comes up as the headline issue.

The issue isn't new, but with the impact of the pandemic there is a real question as to whether there are enough hours in a day to get everything done.

It will come as no surprise that there are no simple "light touch" approaches to assessment – what we all do must meet the high bar needed to secure expectations of rigour and fairness for all students, regardless of the qualifications they are taking.

And much will, inevitably, fall to teachers and their colleges to exercise their professional judgment in generating teacher-assessed grades and to put in place the necessary quality assurance.

Nevertheless, it's important you are supported with guidance that is clear, as consistent as possible



across exam boards, and that meets regulatory demands.

We're doing everything in our power to ensure that the guidance we produce will be simple and timely. So we are working to get guidance out to you about generating teacher-assessed grades for our Cambridge Technicals as well as our Cambridge Nationals next week.

But at the same time, we can only go as fast as decisions are confirmed by policymakers and regulators. There is an Ofqual technical consultation about the vocational framework which closed just last week.

We know Ofqual is working hard to publish the outcomes next week, which is when we plan to publish fuller guidance on how grades for our key vocational qualifications will be arrived at. But there are some things we think we can and should say now about Cambridge Technicals, our popular post-16 qualifications.

For students completing this year we will be asking for grades at qualification, not unit level. This

is a change from the approach we took in 2020 and should help to reduce your workload.

Our approach will be to allow you as much flexibility as possible, just as with A-levels, in identifying sufficient evidence by which to judge a student's performance.

There is no requirement for the evidence to cover all of the content of a qualification. We don't expect cartloads of evidence, virtual or otherwise – just enough, and no more, to inform a professional judgment.

“We can only go as fast as decisions are confirmed by policymakers and regulators”

The evidence you use can come from multiple sources and in different formats. For example, a recorded discussion would be viewed as a useful piece of

evidence.

Your professional judgment will be supported by our performance descriptors, which indicate the level of performance required across the qualification.

There will also be no requirement to submit work for moderation. We are continuing to accept your requests for moderation of Cambridge Technicals units until March 29 and we will conduct virtual external moderation visits, where a college wishes, until the end of April.

We will allow teacher-assessed grades for your students who intended to complete a smaller qualification this year and have arrangements in place, so they can "top up" to a larger qualification next year.

We will be asking you to submit your teacher-assessed grades to us by June 18 this year using the same grade submission system that we used in summer 2020. We'll provide training, step-by-step guidance and FAQs as a refresher.

I hope this gives you some idea of the approach we will be taking and reassurance that we are committed to supporting you in the process of generating and submitting your teacher-assessed grades this summer.

Look out for our updates in the coming week. And we are, of course, always happy to hear your comments and concerns.

DAVID MARSH

Chief executive officer, training provider Babington



This is why we need an Association of Apprentices

Apprentices are often isolated from their peers, and a mentoring and networking service can help reduce drop-out, writes David Marsh

At the start of this month the Association of Apprentices was launched – a membership organisation aimed at providing apprentices with a stronger support and guidance network.

While the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education is a government organisation, set up to design new apprenticeship programmes, this is a group for apprentices themselves.

Despite organisations existing for university students, such as the National Union of Students, a community for apprentices has not properly existed until now – an observation that highlights the need to improve parity between higher and further education.

As a group, apprentices are particularly in need of support from their peers – a community where they can share similar experiences and encourage greater buy-in and engagement.

It is also support that not all apprentices have access to. When apprentices go to large organisations they will often have a community of apprentices around them, but those in SMEs and other smaller businesses may be on their own.

The Association is the brainchild of Sir Peter Estlin, the former Lord Mayor of London, and Jason Holt, the chair of the Apprenticeship

Ambassador Network, an employer-led body sponsored by the Education and Skills Funding Agency. Both sit on its board.

“The idea is to build geographical membership networks”

The other founding partners include the BBC, Blenheim Chalcot, Salesforce, Royal Mail, NHS, exam board NCFE and the organisation I lead, independent training provider Babington.

Two apprentices from the organisation’s Apprentice Council will also become directors on the board, further amplifying the apprenticeship voice.

The Apprentice Council has 30 apprentices, who will help design what the Association looks like going forward. The chair is Joel Roach, an apprentice with Microsoft, and the vice chair is Jasmine King, an apprentice with Flagship Group, a housing association.

Over time, this network will

grow and the more experienced apprentice members can start to support newcomers.

The idea is to build geographical membership networks, so there would be an Association of Apprentices community in Leicester or in Bristol, for example, so that events can be hosted, just as events are held at universities. Our next event will be hosted by the BBC on April 12.

Meanwhile, resources for careers advice and guidance will be created by the founding partners, and mentors will also be on hand to address any risks to engagement and drop-out.

We want to encourage providers to understand more about the Association of Apprentices. Membership of the Association should add value to their programmes by offering a special forum for new apprentices, enhanced access to careers guidance and mentoring programmes.

Meanwhile, the Council will help inform its evolving remit. The intention is not to be a lobbying organisation, but instead provide

a robust support system for apprentices. That said, we will definitely be asking members for views and feedback and will share this as insight to support apprenticeships more broadly.

Finally, it’s timely to reflect on what’s needed to create a strong skills system apprentices can flourish in.

Employers play a vital role in FE, and are a central plank of the FE white paper. But while employers should absolutely be part of the future skills puzzle, it may be more apt to frame them as the brains, rather than the heart, of the FE system.

LEPs and Chambers of Commerce also play an important role but they won’t necessarily want to be the delivery vehicle in the same way training providers can be. And employers won’t always have the expertise regarding the complex and wide range of funding streams.

Further, three out of every four apprentices are trained by independent providers. But their role is significantly underplayed in the FE skills white paper, even though these providers have valuable frontline experience and the insight to support employers with their skills, training and recruitment decisions.

Therefore, we must support employers by giving them the choice to work with the providers that best suit their strategic needs.

Only then can we successfully deliver for young people – and apprentices especially.



GRAHAM HASTING-EVANS

Chief executive of NOCN and president of the British Association of Construction Heads



The DfE has failed to work the industrial strategy into the skills white paper

It looks like the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy aren't talking to each other, writes Graham Hasting-Evans

Do you remember the "industrial strategy"? Back in 2017 the government developed an overarching economic plan spanning up to 2027. From this has flowed a number of sector industry strategies.

These industrial strategies, developed by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, set out the impact that digitisation, artificial intelligence, changes in materials, new ways of working and green technologies would have on sectors.

From these, significant changes were identified to develop the required skills in the UK's workforce: both 16- to 19-year-olds doing traineeships, apprenticeships and T Levels, and also the 34 million in the workforce who need some form of re-skilling.

But what currently is not at all clear is how these industrial strategies fit with the Skills for Jobs white paper proposals put forward by the Department for Education. It is very hard to find joined-up coherence between the two.

Take the white paper's proposed Skills and Productivity Board. The idea behind this board is to provide expert advice on skills mismatches and how to make sure the courses

and qualifications on offer across the country provide the needs of the employers and help grow the economy. It is chaired by Stephen van Rooyen, chief executive at Sky in the UK and Ireland.

Yet it is quite a heavily academic board. I am a fellow of the World Confederation of Productivity Science and in my experience, productivity improvements are achieved through a series of very practical day-to-day changes. It is hard to see how the very academic Skills and Productivity Board will relate to the practically focused industrial strategies developed by BEIS.

Of course, more detail may be yet to come – but the fact the industrial strategy is only mentioned once (in passing) in the white paper is already a cause for concern. Instead, the DfE has created a board without any practitioners on it, other than the chair, and that worries me.

We also need to ask how the industrial strategy is meant to connect at the local level to the Chambers of Commerce, which

were set up as the respected voice of the business communities they represent more than 150 years ago, in some cases.

"The fact the industrial strategy is only mentioned in passing once in the white paper is cause for concern"

The chambers have been tasked with making sure the white paper's "local skills improvement plans" are implemented, which means they should help ensure colleges and providers match their courses to local employers' needs.

How can the chambers do this without knowing what industrial strategies the government has for different kinds of employers and sectors?

Some chambers are very proactive on the local skills agendas, linking to other organisations such as the combined authorities, Local

Enterprise Boards, Confederation of British Industry and Federation of Small Businesses. Others less so.

Even if the local skills improvement plans are properly linked up to the industrial strategies, I'm concerned the plans won't have the flexibility to really respond to the local situation.

We need to remember each area will start from a different place. In some areas, maths and English skills will be sufficient, but in other areas there might be major gaps in these basic employability skills.

All areas will have different mixtures of large employers or small employers. Somewhere like Derby is focused on manufacturing, but if you go down to Devon it will be more concerned with tourism and hospitality.

My worry is the local skills plans will be cast from a central template, and local people won't have enough flexibility to really make them work and match up with local needs and sector-specific industrial strategies. The plans mustn't be managed from the centre.

Overall, the DfE seems to have failed to realise that there is already a productivity plan out there – it's the industrial strategy. It's been completely formulated, yet it appears they've not threaded it into the skills white paper.

It looks like BEIS and the DfE aren't working together. The DfE must think again, and bring the industrial strategies into the heart of the FE white paper.



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READER'S REPLY

FE white paper: Employer casts doubt on Chambers of Commerce leading role

From what I read in this article, Paul Allman doesn't seem to have any knowledge or idea of the role chambers play in not only how they support and represent local businesses and communities at a local, regional and national level, but the connection and relationships they have with large and smaller employers across all sectors. For once, government is bringing the right people to the table to tackle this age-old conundrum of what skills are required locally.

Peter, website

A glance at the map on the British Chambers of Commerce website suggests that accredited chambers are pretty thin on the ground where I live in the south-west. There also appear to be an unknown number of non-accredited chambers. My local chamber in Cheltenham, for example, is not accredited, and when I spoke to them told me they have no plans to seek accreditation. It seems to me that this patchy coverage must add further doubts about the capacity of the chambers to fulfil the role ascribed them in the white paper.

Mike Farmer, website

'Absurd': Small employers blocked from apprentice cash incentives

I can see why the cap is in place. In the example in the article, assuming an average wage for the nursery staff is £20k per annum, the company would have to hire fewer than 150 staff to not be a levy payer. (This is possibly an underestimate of wages in London.) Is hiring 20 apprentices and making such a large part of your workforce on a training scheme a worthwhile experience for those people?

Kailam Dale, website

REPLY OF THE WEEK

FE white paper: Employer casts doubt on Chambers of Commerce leading role



Some chambers (such as Essex) are highly effective. My issue is that their scope is broad and pretty much geographic. I question their effectiveness in driving the skills agenda in specific sectors on a national basis.

Paul Butler, Twitter

We are still awaiting the ESFA to resolve the pooled PAYE issue for non-levy schools who use the local authority payroll services. The system does not allow them to have their own account on the Digital Apprenticeship Service as it shows they are levy-paying. We were told it would be resolved by March 2021 and have not heard anything as yet. This has been an issue that was identified last March 2020. We would ask politely that we need help to resolve and remove this additional apprenticeship start barrier.

Jill Eaton, website

Victims of county lines gangs easily go under the radar in colleges



So vital! Every safeguarding partnership I know (local authority, police, clinical commissioning groups at heart, EVERYBODY else working with children and young person-relevant agencies) has a focus on these issues, and the serious violence and crime that attend them. Vital that FE and others in education are central to it. See the signs and act.

Maggie Atkinson, Twitter

This is how I brought Swedish 'fika' to FE in England



I make my British-Swedish son his kvällsfika [evening snack] all the time.

Tom Bewick, Twitter

Bulletin

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Mushall Khan

Director of corporate operations, Learning Curve Group

Start date March 2021

Previous job
Chief operating officer, Corndel

Interesting fact
At age 21, she planned and organised her sister's wedding in Pakistan for 500 guests.



Iain Hatt

Principal, Wiltshire College and University Centre

Start date August 2021

Previous job
Deputy principal for curriculum and quality, Wiltshire College and University Centre

Interesting fact
During the last 12 months, he has become a keen runner and is looking forward to completing his first marathon - once it is allowed.

Movers & Shakers

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



Margaret Greenwood

Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Adult Education

Start date February 2021

Concurrent job
MP for Wirral West

Interesting fact
She previously worked as a teacher of English in secondary schools, FE colleges, and adult education settings, and as a basic skills tutor.



Andrew Slade

Principal, Oaklands College

Start date August 2021

Previous job
College principal, South Thames College

Interesting fact
As a part-time sports psychologist, he has worked with a number of elite athletes, who have achieved national and international titles.

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