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## THERE IS A NEW SHERIFF IN SKILLS TOWN



Page 5

## ESFA LOSES CONFIDENCE IN...THEMSELVES

- Agency tells college auditors to stop trusting their year-end funding statement
- Every college will need a funding assurance review before accounts signed off
- AoC fears 'last-minute scramble' for extra work from the external auditors

Page 4

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# FEWEEK

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### Tripling traineeships: no growth yet, but new providers remain upbeat



Page 7



### First college in England approved for nursing training

Page 13



### The Commission on Race is a spectacularly badly-timed distraction

Page 25



### If your college isn't in a careers hub, here's the evidence it should be

Page 26

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# ESFA loses confidence in...themselves

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From front

Exclusive

The government body responsible for funding assurance appears to have lost confidence in itself.

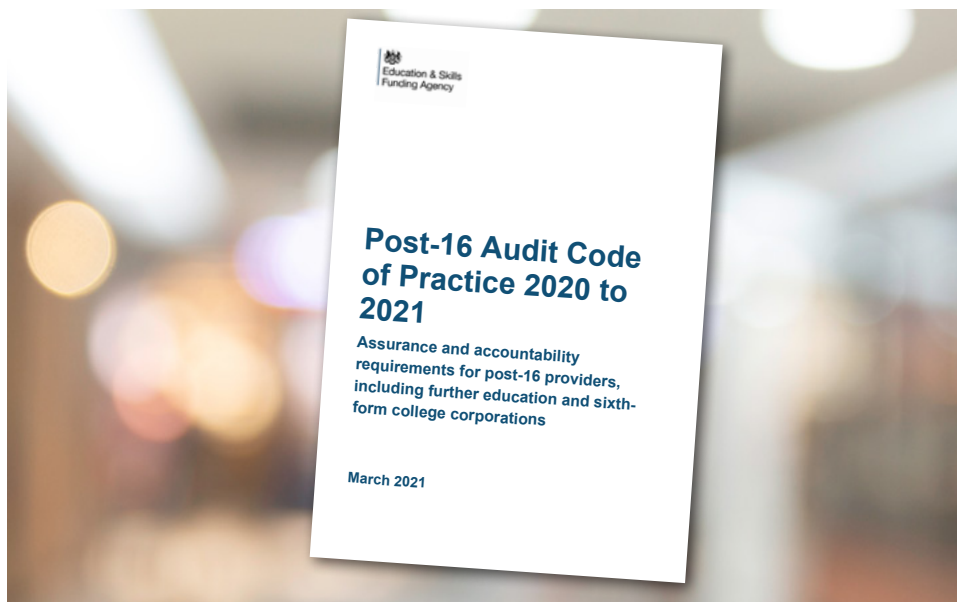
The Education and Skills Funding Agency is requiring all external auditors to conduct a funding audit this year, before signing off on the annual college financial statements.

News of the significant change came buried in the Post-16 Audit Code of Practice for 2020 to 2021, published by the ESFA this week.

One of 19 "changes" stated the ESFA year-end funding statement "does not constitute assurance over the funds earned by the college".

In previous years, external auditors signed off college accounts without checking the accuracy of income claims received from the main funding grants generated through the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) returns, because the ESFA provided the assurance.

Julian Gravatt, deputy chief executive at the Association of Colleges and former college finance director, told *FE Week* the change



"risks creating a last-minute scramble by colleges and auditors to carry out extra work in summer 2021.

"Colleges aim to comply with high audit standards but we don't agree with the ESFA decision to introduce this change two-thirds of the way through the year."

And in an email to all AoC members seen by *FE Week*, Gravatt says: "The implication of this change is that external auditors will now carry out more work this summer and early autumn to ensure compliance with funding rules.

In effect this extends the funding audit to all colleges this year – at their own expense."

According to several college accountants who spoke to *FE Week*, the responsibility for funding audit being passed from the ESFA to colleges presents a number of challenges.

Many accountancy firms that currently undertake external audit for colleges have never conducted a "funding assurance review".

This is likely to present resourcing challenges announced so late in the year and raises the prospect of additional costs for colleges.

However, Gravatt said he hoped external audit firms would "handle any extra work within agreed and fixed budgets".

It also remains uncertain whether other funding bodies reliant on the ILR returns, such as mayoral combined authorities, will make similar demands.

**"Colleges aim to comply with high audit standards but we don't agree with the ESFA decision"**

And despite the move from the ESFA to require the extra assurance work, there has been no suggestion they will scale back the number of audits they conduct themselves.

Gravatt was also keen to point out that this late change appeared to go against broader government plans to reduce bureaucracy.

"The FE white paper promises simplification but, for colleges, the current audit code is a uniquely complicated custom-built framework involving internal, external, regularity and multi-year funding audits," he said.



Julian Gravatt

# Long-standing college leader named as new FE Commissioner

**BILLY CAMDEN**  
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## From front

The chief executive of one of the country's largest college groups has been appointed the next FE Commissioner.

Shelagh Legrave, who has worked at Chichester College since 2003 and became its leader in 2010, will succeed Richard Atkins on a permanent basis from October.

As *FE Week* revealed on Wednesday, current deputy FE Commissioner Frances Wadsworth has taken up the post on an interim basis until Legrave takes the reins.

Legrave is a qualified accountant and currently chairs the Coastal West Sussex Skills & Enterprise Group as well as Bourne Community College and homeless charity Stonepillow.

She is also vice chair of the Collab Group and sits on the Chichester Festival Theatre board.

Chichester College has grown into one of England's largest college groups under

her leadership. She has led it through two mergers to achieve an 'outstanding' judgment from Ofsted in 2020.

Legrave, who was awarded an OBE in 2015, said it was a "great privilege" to be appointed FE Commissioner, particularly at "this critical time, when skills will be vital to rebuilding our economy and communities."

"As the FE white paper has set out, colleges will be at the forefront of education and training that will enable social mobility and address the needs of employers," she added.

"I look forward to supporting the secretary of state and skills minister to ensure that further education and sixth-form colleges across England are in the strongest possible position to change people's lives for the better."

Education secretary Gavin Williamson, who announced the appointment on Thursday, said: "I am delighted to appoint Shelagh to this vital role. She is hugely experienced in the sector, with a track record of outstanding success and improvement."

"At this crucial time for the country, an outstanding further education sector will be more important than ever and I look forward to working with Shelagh to support and challenge the sector to be the best it can be."

The FE Commissioner role was introduced in 2013 as a key adviser to ministers in



Shelagh Legrave

the Department for Education. The commissioner intervenes in struggling colleges, where visits turn into published reports that assess quality and financial health, as well as the existing governance and leadership.

Its inaugural post holder was Sir David Collins, who was replaced by Atkins in 2016.

The FE Commissioner leads a team of around 18 deputy FE commissioners and FE advisers, made up mainly of former college principals or deputy principals and directors of finance.

The four-day week role will earn Legrave £135,000 per annum. It is a two-year term.

Williamson thanked outgoing FE Commissioner Atkins for his more than four years of service. "He has made a huge impact in the role, which has developed significantly under his leadership, and I wish him all the best in his retirement," the education secretary added.



Richard Atkins

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# Tripling traineeships: no growth yet, but new providers remain upbeat

BILLY CAMDEN  
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## Exclusive

The government has failed to boost radically the number of traineeships in the first half of the year – but providers tasked with tripling the number of starts insist they are up for the challenge.

*FE Week* analysis of the latest Department for Education data shows there were 8,800 starts between August 2020 and January 2021 – just 400 more than were achieved in the same period the previous year.

It means that more than 35,000 starts are needed between February and July to hit chancellor Rishi Sunak's goal of tripling their number this year to combat youth unemployment following Covid-19.

In the same period last year, 6,500 starts were recorded and took the final 2019/20 year-end figure to 14,900.

This year's continued sluggish take-up comes despite the government reforming the funding rules for the pre-employment programme in September, which included increasing the funding rate for 19-to-24 traineeships by 54 per cent, from £970 to £1,500, and opening them up to people who already hold a level 3 qualification.

Employer cash incentives of £1,000 for each traineeship learner they take on were also introduced.

A big chunk of the starts needed in the last half of 2020/21 – around 20,000 – are hoped to come from a £65 million tender for 19-to-24 traineeships.

The procurement was originally planned to get under way last summer but was beset with delays – an issue that *FE Week* understands personally annoyed Sunak, as it hindered his expansion plans.

Despite only having a brief window to recruit, training providers that won big in the tender are optimistic about spending their full allocations.

Let Me Play



Rishi Sunak

## Traineeship starts (Aug to Jan)

		2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Age-group	Under 19	7,200	6,800	6,500
	19-24	1,600	1,600	2,300
Total		8,800	8,400	8,800

Source: DFE's Apprenticeship and traineeship statistics March 2021

Ltd, a provider that did not previously hold a traineeship contract but won the largest allocation, just shy of the £3 million cap, told *FE Week* it is "profiled to spend the majority of the contract".

The firm's co-founder and director Matthew Lord said: "We mobilised swiftly – so far no challenges. We have lots of young people who are keen for an opportunity and many employers who are very committed to support with placements."

Corndel Limited is another provider new to traineeships but which received a contract of just below £3 million. Its founder and chief executive Sean Williams agreed it is a "significant task" to increase traineeship numbers to the level required but that trainees will, "unfortunately, not be difficult, given the disproportionate impact this economic crisis is having on young people".

He explained that the biggest challenge is that most of Corndel's employer partners are still working exclusively remotely, which means "we have to find meaningful, impactful work experience placements that can be delivered connected-by-technology rather than physically co-located.

"We need to do this in a way that is compliant with the funding rule guidance whilst meeting the needs of employers and trainees in the new reality we find ourselves in," he added.

Williams said his provider had originally planned 880 starts in the six-month timeframe given, and he is still "confident" of hitting that number.

Elsewhere, another new traineeships provider, Professional Training Solutions, told *FE Week* it expects to exceed its allocation of £1.6 million. Managing director Jackie Denyer said that early engagement has been "strong" but listed several challenges that may dampen the

national effort to increase starts.

These include the "ringfencing of the regional allocations, which makes it difficult to engage national employers"; ensuring the government's Kickstart scheme "doesn't reduce demand for traineeships"; and the recovery time of sectors hit hardest by the pandemic, such as hospitality.

Steffan Edwards, managing director of Skillcert – a new traineeships provider which won a £1.2 million contract – echoed Denyer's concern that Kickstart could push recruitment for traineeships down. However, he is "really optimistic" about hitting his target of 300 starts as "we have such high employer demand".

Other longstanding traineeship providers that were unsuccessful in the tender are not as confident.

Analysis by Babington, shared with *FE Week*, shows that more than three-quarters of providers with 19-to-24 traineeship allocations in 2019/20 do not have a contract in 2020/21.

Babington's chief executive, David Marsh, said he was "very disappointed" to have his bid in the recent "frustrating" tender rejected as they have been "one of a few providers to have kept the programme alive and have invested significantly in it" since its launch in 2013.

"The fact that such a large number of existing and successful providers have not been successful while others completely new to the programme have received such large allocations, and smaller providers getting growth of nearly 3,000 per cent, is incredibly concerning and certainly points towards a process that is not fit for purpose," he told *FE Week*.

"Surely the ESFA should be building on the areas of success and expanding, rather than handing the majority of the money to providers who are new and inexperienced."



# Swithenbank's payoff revealed as auditors confirm financial regulations breached

NICK LINFORD  
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## Exclusive

The former chief executive of Hull College Group received £219,000 last year, despite only being in post for 67 days.

Payments to Michelle Swithenbank are revealed in the published accounts alongside external auditor findings that a £300,000 three-year deal she signed with a local rugby club breached the college's financial regulations.

External auditors reveal in the published 2019/20 accounts that the stadium naming rights and shirt sponsorship deal was "only signed by one authorised signatory who was the corporation's accounting officer in office during the year [Swithenbank], and neither were the agreements approved by the corporation".

The college chair at the time, Dafydd Williams, confirmed to *FE Week* that the "contract [with Hull Kingston Rovers] was never brought to the board for discussion or approval and was signed off by individual executives without our knowledge".

The auditors also found the college "failed to discharge its duty of care with regard to the novel nature of these transactions" as they ignored legal advice and no evidence was found for any business case or value for money analysis.

Swithenbank led Hull College Group until taking a leave of absence on October 7, 2019 when Williams commissioned an unrelated investigation into financial misconduct.

Two months later, on December 20, Williams emailed all staff to announce that the investigation had found "no impropriety on the part of Michelle [...] nevertheless, Michelle has informed us that she wishes to move on, and feels this is a good time to do so".

The true cost of the deal with Hull KR only

came to light earlier this year following an *FE Week* freedom of information request and subsequent intervention from the Information Commissioner's Office.

After reporting the deal in *FE Week*, interim chief executive, Lowell Williams, then launched his own investigation with internal auditors, which is due to report later this month.

Williams, who departs later this month when the first permanent chief executive since Swithenbank's departure takes over, said "enquiries are ongoing" concerning the "irregular transaction" and he was "confident that the corporation will take appropriate action" - not ruling out the college could seek to recover some or all of the payoff.

The college accounts detail a total of £390,000 spent on the chief executive post in the 12 months from August 1, 2019 until July 31, 2020, compared to £140,000 in the previous financial year.

This consisted of £162,000 contractual and £57,000 non-contractual payments for Swithenbank, with the remaining £171,000 spent on three interim chief executives.

Hull College Group hit the headlines several years ago after requiring a £50 million bailout from the government as part of a 'Fresh Start' process that preceded several hundred staff

being made redundant.

And in recent weeks staff were informed the college would be disposing of their campus in Goole in July 2021, leaving the group with just their main campus at Queens Gardens in the city centre, a motor vehicle centre on Cannon Street (close to the city centre) and a construction centre in East Hull.

## "What is now revealed is unacceptable and inexcusable"

On hearing of the payoff and auditor findings, the University and College Union's head of further education Andrew Harden told *FE Week*: "We can't undo the events of the past but what is now revealed is completely unacceptable and inexcusable.

"The levels of mismanagement and poor governance that have occurred leading up to and since the financial crisis at the college should not impact on students or staff in the way they have. Staff have worked extraordinarily hard for their students and are completely committed to restoring the reputation of the college.

"It is unacceptable that further wrongdoing has continued since the 'Fresh Start' approved by the FE Commissioner and monitored and scrutinised by his teams.

"Given the college acknowledges financial and audit regulations have not been followed, it is only right and proper that the leaders who have overseen these issues should be held to account."

Swithenbank was approached for comment.



Michelle Swithenbank





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# AEB clawback: colleges not permitted to make a business case

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College leaders have hit out at the government's decision to block them from presenting business cases as a means to avoid adult education funding being clawed back.

The Education and Skills Funding Agency announced on Wednesday the 90 per cent threshold on AEB is its "final position" for 2020/21, leading the Association of College's deputy chief executive Julian Gravatt to brand it a "self-defeating blanket line".

He said there was "no scenario" in which taking the money from the sector "won't come with consequences, including pushing some into financial difficulties".

Ruling out business cases does not "consider the context" in which colleges under-delivered on their adult education allocations, he added.

This was because under-delivery this year was "largely out of colleges' control" owing to multiple lockdowns, Gravatt said, and the government's actions would "not help colleges, not help the government deliver its commitments, and not help our communities and businesses".

The 90 per cent threshold was announced last week. As revealed by *FE Week*, the decision was forced by the Treasury. Its officials successfully argued that colleges have had enough time to reorientate provision and run courses online, where needed, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It sent shockwaves through the FE sector, after the government allowed a much more generous threshold of 68 per cent for 2019/20 allocations.

ESFA officials were said to have been surprised by it as well, and Leicester College principal Verity Hancock told *FE Week* "officials were suggesting we might be looking at another 68 per cent level".

Sector leaders had hoped colleges would be able to present business cases as to why they should be allowed to keep hold of their funding if they fail to hit the 90 per cent target. That hope has now been quashed.

Leicester College revealed last week that it forecast it would only be able to deliver 53 per cent of its allocation this year – and would lose

more than £4 million to the clawback.

Hancock said the college has already suffered consequences from the clawback, having had to back out of a capital funding bid for T Levels. These are qualifications the provider is due to start delivering from September 2021. The bid was worth £6.6 million and would have involved the college match funding £3.8 million, which, Hancock says, "we can no longer afford".

Leicester College, along with the rest of the city, has been in continual lockdown since March 2020.

So on the ESFA's decision to rule out business cases, Hancock, a former Skills Funding Agency executive director herself, said she doesn't "understand the basis for a decision that refuses to recognise the very exceptional position that Leicester College is in, given that it was the worst affected city in the country from continuous lockdowns, and has the largest AEB offer in the country, focused on those furthest from the labour market, who for very, very legitimate reasons have not been able to learn at Leicester College this year."

Hancock warned the scale of the clawback would set the college back five years, financially.

Announcing that business cases would not be allowed, the ESFA said the 90 per cent threshold will be "the final position for the 2020/21 academic year and will not be subject to change".

But it was informing colleges of the change this week "to help providers better plan their provision for the remainder of the 2020 to 2021 academic year".

The agency made clear that where providers deliver less than 90 per cent, they will recover the difference between their actual delivery and 90 per cent. For example, delivery of 85 per cent would result in a recovery of five per cent of the allocation.

Recovering funding will be scheduled from this December, and the agency will "preferably" recover money in full in the 2021/22 financial year.

It has promised to "work with providers that would like to request a phased recovery plan" of up to four months.

"Where this would cause financial difficulties, we will consider cases beyond this with your ESFA territorial team."

## Controversial adult funding threshold dropped to 68% – but only for Liverpool

A mayoral authority has set a 68 per cent clawback threshold for its devolved adult education budget, in a split from central government.

The decision from Liverpool City Region comes after the Education and Skills Funding Agency was widely criticised for setting a 90 per cent threshold for the national AEB (see above).

Liverpool's move was revealed in a letter from the Association of Colleges to its members on Thursday.

Latest AoC projections, Gravatt also wrote, indicate that the "collective forecast" for average AEB delivery now is 77 per cent, so the total clawback under the national AEB "will be £59 million", with no concessions after the ESFA ruled out business cases.

The ESFA, which itself set a 68 per cent threshold for 2019/20 allocations, has defended the 90 per cent threshold by saying it is a "fair representation of grant funded providers' average delivery" in 2020/21.

There are eight mayoral combined authorities in England with devolved AEB which decide their own funding rules.

The Greater London Authority previously announced it would apply a 90 per cent threshold this year, the same as the ESFA. *FE Week* has asked if this position has changed at all, but the authority could not say at this stage, because of local elections and purdah rules.

Liverpool City Region, which is led by Steve Rotherham, has been approached for comment.



Steve Rotherham

# Race report 'avoids tackling' systematic discrimination in apprentice recruitment

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## Exclusive

An ethnic minority representative group has slammed a prime ministerial commission's proposal for an apprentice recruitment campaign "highly targeted" at diverse communities.

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities claimed this week that "prejudice and ignorance" within ethnic minority families led to a low take-up of apprenticeship starts in their communities.

*FE Week* analysis of government data shows that 42,100 (13 per cent) of the 332,500 apprenticeship starts in 2019/20 were by black, Asian and ethnic minority (BAME) learners.

This is slightly out of kilter with the 15 per cent of England's population who are BAME, according to NHS England data collated by the Nuffield Trust in 2020.

The key proposal of the commission to tackle this issue was a "highly targeted" apprenticeship recruitment campaign, designed by the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions, and delivered by FE colleges and school career hubs.

"Our view," the report states, "is that such a campaign could be of particular benefit to young people who face discrimination or disadvantage and currently lack access to in-depth information about the full range of career pathways".

However, the commission's proposal has been criticised by the Black Training and Enterprise Group, which said the recommendation "fundamentally avoids tackling unfair and discriminatory employer recruitment practices".

This, the group says, has affected sectors including construction, engineering and technology, where BAME people "continue to be under-represented in jobs and apprenticeships. Far too much recruitment in the UK relies on word-of-mouth recruitment, informal methods, attending the right schools and universities,

and looking like the recruiters and having similar sounding names," the group explained.

Chief executive Jeremy Crook said the report overall "failed to grasp the considerable evidence of institutional and structural racism in the UK," and BTEG was calling on the government to "rethink its approach".

In response to the report, chair of the government's Apprenticeship Diversity Champions Network Lia Nici admitted: "There is still a lot of work to do to ensure our apprenticeships, and the careers that develop from them, fully represent the diverse mixture of people in the UK."

She said the report "highlights a wide range of issues with regard to diversity and race in the UK," not just in terms of ethnicity.

"We also know that there are fewer apprentices who have disabilities, as well as females working in science, engineering, technology or maths-based roles. We want to encourage apprentices from a broader range of backgrounds."

Nici said the champions network, a group of employers formed in 2017, was already discussing "a range of targeted activities" to encourage apprenticeships in communities

that have not seen strong take-up.

Under-representation of BAME people in apprenticeships is by no means a new revelation, nor is the claim that ethnic minority families do not place a high value on apprenticeships.

Crook reported in a 2018 essay for the Learning and Work Institute on a group of mostly-BAME foundation year degree students who told them "more academic qualifications will give them a better chance of success in the labour market".

However, he wrote, "the reality is that BAME graduates have higher rates of unemployment than white graduates".

A 2018 report, *Apprenticeships and Diversity in Context in Greater Manchester* by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, found BAME young people "aspire to and are encouraged towards high educational attainment", with family and community expectations being "especially significant [whereas] apprenticeships are not seen as enabling aspiration to the same degree".

The Department for Education's public attempts to redress low ethnic minority take-up goes back to when Justine Greening was education secretary under Theresa May. Greening was accused of being "all talk" after telling the education select committee that the government had a "big focus" on encouraging "a higher proportion of BAME young people going into apprenticeships".

This was after *FE Week* found at the time that just eight per cent of England's young apprentices were BAME.

Since then, the DfE says it has "ensured that young BAME role models are visible in campaigns such as 'Fire It Up', and that we are hearing the voices of young apprentices (including BAME) through apprentice networks, such as the Young Apprentice Ambassador Network and the Apprentice Panel".

The Department for Education and the Government Equalities Office, which is leading on the commission's report, were approached for comment.



Jeremy Crook



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# First college in England approved for nursing training

BILLY CAMDEN

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The first college in the country to have its own nursing provision approved for direct delivery has been revealed.

South Devon College has gained Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) approval and can now deliver its own nursing associate programme, rather than having to partner with a university.

The NMC is the regulator for the nursing and midwifery professions in the UK and has traditionally only given higher education providers permission to deliver qualifications for the industry.

South Devon College is one of only nine colleges nationwide that has its own foundation degree awarding powers, which made the move possible. It applied for Approved Education Institution (AEI) status with the NMC two years ago. No other colleges have applied for approval

to date.

Maria Woodger, assistant principal at South Devon College, described the success following a "rigorous process" as a "fantastic achievement" that means "so much to the college, our students and the wider healthcare community".

The college said its two-year pre-registration nursing associate foundation degree course on offer provides a direct route to becoming a registered nursing associate. After two years, students are also able to take the new nursing apprenticeship route.

As the college has foundation degree awarding powers, it can also offer the level 5 nursing associate apprenticeship.

Lucy Hunte, the national programme manager for apprenticeships at Health Education England, said she was "delighted" to see a college move into the direct nursing delivery space.

"There are other examples across the country

of partnerships with employers and HE, and we recognise that FE colleges have apprenticeship expertise, and partnerships like these will allow the NHS to achieve our ambitious targets for the level 5 nursing associate apprenticeship and progressions on to the registered nurse degree apprenticeship," she added.

Alexander Rhys, the NMC's assistant director of professional practice, said this was a "fantastic step" for both South Devon College and the council in "helping aspiring professionals achieve the nursing associate qualification in the most safe and effective way possible".

He added that he hopes "they will be the first of many colleges seeking direct approval to run a nursing associate programme".

The college said that since the Covid-19 pandemic, applications to nursing courses nationally have increased by 32 per cent in the past year, with more than 60,000 people interested in nursing as a career.



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## Colleges for learners or employers? Governance adviser warns of legal tension

FRASER WHIELDON

[FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK)

## Exclusive

The government's drive for colleges to focus on helping the economy goes against their "lawful purpose" of meeting the needs of learners, a governance expert has warned.

Fiona Chalk, national head of governance development for The Education and Training Foundation, told an *FE Week* webcast this week there is an "inherent tension" between the two goals.

"It is colleges' lawful purpose to meet the needs of students first and foremost," Chalk said, and "you could argue that it is not a lawful activity for college corporations to have, as their primary purpose, meeting the needs of employers, or indeed the local or national economy.

"Any benefit to employers or the economy has to come as an indirect outcome of corporations' activity around meeting the needs of its students."

Chalk, alongside the Association of Colleges' governance adviser Kurt Hall and lawyer Mark Taylor from Eversheds Sutherland, was speaking on the fourth chapter of the Skills for Jobs white paper.

The chapter sets out reforms intended to "strengthen" college governance, within the paper's overall objective of "placing employers at the heart of defining local skills needs".

Colleges operate as exempt charities, so, for instance, do not have to submit accounts to the Charity Commission, but do have to apply to them if they wish to remunerate governors.

Under the white paper's plans, employer bodies such as Chambers of Commerce are set to head Local Skills Improvement Plans, which will "shape technical skills provision so that it meets local labour market skills needs".

Chalk, whose employer the ETF is one of government's most trusted delivery partners in the FE sector, said she expected there to be "some synergies" between helping students and employers, but warned: "There's a real, inherent

tension here."

A number of chairs – including those of colleges focusing on sport, or which are "heavily involved" in creative industries, or which have "huge" adult learning provision – have already been in touch with her, Chalk said. They are worried that "although they may be meeting the needs of their students under charity law, what happens if they're not sufficiently fulfilling the local skills improvement plans?

"Does that mean they're going to be under intervention?"

The Department for Education's director of post-16 strategy Keith Smith confirmed during an *FE Week* webcast earlier this month that an upcoming Skills Bill, based on the white paper, will enable the education secretary to intervene where colleges refuse to deliver courses decided through the plans.

But, Chalk questioned: "Which duty trumps which duty? Which voice in the boardroom is going to be louder, that of students or that of employers?"

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# Labour claims one-third of jobs are omitted from adult level 3 scheme

BILLY CAMDEN

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Over 9.4 million people are working in sectors excluded from the government's new adult level 3 offer under its lifetime skills guarantee, analysis by the Labour Party has found as the scheme launches.

*FE Week* was first to reveal that key economic sectors, such as retail, hospitality and travel and tourism, have been left out of the flagship scheme, which prime minister Boris Johnson hopes will help people retrain after the pandemic.

Labour has now analysed House of Commons Library data and found that over one-third of all current jobs will be excluded from the training programme as a result.

This follows another recent *FE Week* investigation that revealed how the offer is being misrepresented.

The Department for Education and skills minister Gillian Keegan have repeatedly said the policy will enable eligible adults to achieve "their first full level 3 qualification". However, this publication's analysis found over half of the qualifications on offer do not meet the DfE's own definition of a "full" level 3 qualification, with over one-third being below an indicative 360 guided learning hours.

Labour has also pointed out that adults who already hold a level 3 qualification are also excluded from accessing the scheme, which is due to rollout from April 1. The scheme is backed with £95 million from the National Skills Fund.

Shadow further education and skills minister Toby Perkins said: "You would be forgiven for thinking the Conservatives' Lifetime Skills Guarantee is an April Fools' joke, rather than a plan to help reskill our country after this pandemic.

"The Conservatives' mishandling of the Covid crisis has led the UK to experience the worst economic crisis of any major economy. Their limited plans will now leave millions unable to access the skills they need to play their part in



Boris Johnson

our recovery."

He called on ministers to "urgently" widen eligibility for the level 3 adult offer to "ensure it reaches all adults who could benefit".

The DfE declined to comment on Labour's analysis, but in a press release about the launch of the scheme, education secretary Gavin Williamson said: "This offer will help give millions of adults the chance to gain the skills they need to secure rewarding careers in key sectors."

And prime minister Boris Johnson added: "As we cautiously lift lockdown restrictions, the government's focus is on recovering from the pandemic and building back better.

"The lifetime skills guarantee is fundamental to that – with free courses giving adults the expertise they need to find new, better jobs."

Ahead of the policy's launch, the DfE said the government will pilot an extension to the length of time that people can receive Universal Credit while undertaking work-focused study. It is currently set at eight weeks.

They will now be able to train full time for up to 12 weeks, or up to 16 weeks on a full-time skills bootcamp in England, while receiving Universal Credit to support their living costs.

The qualifications that are on offer range from engineering to social care and are available to

any adult who has not already achieved a qualification at level 3.

There are 387 currently available, but the list is still in its first draft. The list 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.

Employers have, however, 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.

The scheme 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.

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Introducing

# SARBDIP NOONAN

Principal,  
Stanmore College

'We fought to stand alone  
and from that we've built  
and built and built'

JL DUTAUT  
[JL.DUTAUT@FEWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:JL.DUTAUT@FEWEEK.CO.UK)

**She's always made her own way.  
Now, Sarbdip Noonan is learning very different  
'lessons from Covid' from the rest of us, finds JL  
Dutaut**

Among the many 'lessons from Covid', a popular refrain has been the success of larger organisations in dealing with the pandemic's

fallout. Sharing knowledge, resources and expertise has, so the new urban myth goes, allowed them to thrive where smaller players have struggled.

To this, Sarbdip Noonan has a two-word retort: Stanmore College.

Founded in 1987, Elm Park College as it was then known replaced the Stanmore sixth-form college on its site as one of three tertiary colleges to serve the London borough of Harrow. The Elm Park

name was soon deemed unrepresentative of the community (read: too posh), so in 1994 it reclaimed the Stanmore name. Today, the college serves some 2,500 learners – of whom approximately 1,500 are full-time 16-to-18-year-olds – making it a small college by modern standards.

Noonan has been principal here since February 2016. She took over when the college was at its lowest ebb. A five-year decline from 2010 had seen Stanmore fall



# Profile

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from Ofsted 'good' to 'inadequate' and she turned its fortunes around. "We had roughly 18 months from the previous inspection to give this college a fighting chance, and we did that. We did it in 12 months, actually."

Why "a fighting chance"? Because running parallel to the college's Ofsted journey was an existential threat from another external source – an area review. "If we hadn't improved the quality, we wouldn't have had a voice," Noonan tells me. "But the administered status was removed and we had a voice and we resisted to merge."

## "We had a voice and we resisted to merge"

That year Harrow College, itself the result of the 1999 merger of Harrow's other two 1987 tertiary colleges, merged with Uxbridge College to form HCUC. Between them, they now form what might be considered a medium-sized institution, with some 8,000 learners.

The addition of Stanmore into the mix would have seen the new organisation become one of the sector's new breed of big beasts, but Stanmore chose its own path. "It wasn't the right thing for this college," says Noonan. "This is a small college that serves its community very effectively and serves it

well. It's a local FE college and it provides the right education and training for the people who come here."

Not that Noonan is averse to mergers altogether. The area review also brought up a possible merger with West Herts College, then Ofsted 'outstanding', and Noonan and her team were initially enthused. "But as we started going through the process it soon became apparent that we were in a better position than they were."

By April, West Herts had dropped an inspection grade and pulled out. "The merger didn't happen, so we fought to stand alone and from that we've built and built and built".

When Noonan joined Stanmore, its full-time roll was half what it is now. That's certainly a mark of her success, but it goes beyond tropes about effective leadership. The site hasn't undergone any major expansion as rolls have mushroomed, and as we discuss her response to that challenge it dawns on me that she has in fact learned a completely different set of 'lessons from Covid' from much of the rest of the sector.

The thread that weaves our conversation together is community. It was her sense that Harrow and Uxbridge were too removed from Stanmore in terms of geography and clientele that drove her to resist that merger. It was her sense that Stanmore deserved a college focused on its needs that persuaded her to unpick the West Herts merger.

She lives in Essex, and refers to raising her three children in and around London as her career progressed in areas just like



Noonan's three children, 2012

Stanmore. "A lot of students who come here come from very deprived backgrounds. This really is a second chance for them to do something different. And Stanmore really turns that around for them."

She tells me her driving force is that "if it's not good enough for my children, then it's not good enough for anybody's children". (And her children have done very well indeed. Her eldest is a barrister, her second a financial consultant and her youngest a doctor.)

But while 'serving communities' is also a refrain among sector leaders learning from the pandemic, to Noonan it's about so much more than setting up a food bank or making PPE for the local hospital. It's a sustained modus operandi. "You can work in a very different way," she enthuses. "You can serve this community in a very, very different way."

As it turns out, she's no stranger to doing things differently. Raised in a Sikh household, she chooses to "take the bits of the Sikh culture and English culture that are interesting for me and blend the two together". They work well for her, she adds.

One of five children, whose working-class parents arrived from the Punjab in the 1960s to make a better life for themselves, she was raised "in a tight-knit family" but made her own way in life. Her marriage to an Englishman didn't go down well. They actually eloped to Australia when he went there for a teacher exchange programme! "Initially, my parents didn't want anything to do with me.



Noonan's mum and dad in the early days, 1957



# Profile

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But within a year, they sort of came around.”

More than that, they made a real success of it. Her husband, she tells me, went on to become her dad’s best friend in his old age. Going from ‘inadequate’ to ‘outstanding’ must feel like a walk in the park by comparison.

## “I’m very proud to be an Asian woman in this society, and have a successful career”

She even rebelled against her own professional expectations. She actually graduated with a degree in combined sciences. “I initially wanted to be a pharmacist but I remember I did a year after university in a pharmacy and I thought, ‘Ugh! I can’t stand it!’”

She attended comprehensive schools and fought through the artificial limits of class, race and gender to become a teacher, head of department and executive director in schools. Then she became a local authority officer for Essex County Council and from there made the move across to FE – retraining for the sector – and served as deputy principal in



Noonan with her parents, 2010

turnaround circumstances for three colleges before getting the top job at Stanmore. Meanwhile, she’s been a part-time Ofsted inspector for 15 years too.

Now, nearing retirement, she’s not looking for a big move or the next opportunity. But nor is she happy to sit on her laurels. She feels a deep responsibility to working-class young people and especially to Asian young women. “I’m in a very privileged position as a principal. And I think I need to enable women to be aspirational, to be more demanding and fighting for their rights in

society. And I’m very proud to be an Asian woman in this society, and actually have made a really successful career. I’m a role model for many others, and why not? You know, if I can do it, why can’t they?”

So how is this inveterate free thinker learning from Covid and thinking about the future of Stanmore College?

Well, bigger definitely doesn’t mean better, for a start. And advances in online learning will definitely mean developing “new ways of delivery”, but it’s about much more than that.

“It’s about thinking in terms of the space the

college can offer for students. There’s an opportunity to bring education to where the students are, for satellite centres, multi-modular routes, the OU model and distance learning. You’re not confined to this space, so it’s about delivering education and training to young people and adults in a very different way.”

Pre-pandemic, education news was full of stories of young people’s gig economy future. The crisis has seen the start of an exodus of young people from the capital, with research showing they have little intention of returning. That’s likely to reshape further education here and in other urban centres.

Thought about properly, it all makes responding to central government guidance much less important in the long term. In fact, it even has the potential to make central government guidance itself a relic of pre-pandemic times, relied upon only in periods of national emergency.

Which raises some pretty fundamental questions about the past 30 years of ever-larger mergers and makes flexibility and serving communities all the more important in future planning.

“And that’s what Stanmore does well,” says Noonan. “So whoever takes the college on some day, it is in an outstanding position to take it further in its very different way.”



With husband, Tony, 2012





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## ANJALI SHAH

Senior lecturer  
in education,  
University of Chester



## The Commission on Race is a spectacularly badly-timed distraction

**The report seeks to lay responsibility for painful lived experience at the door of individuals and families, writes Anjali Shah**

When the government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report came out on Wednesday, I got an email from a student. "I don't know what to make of this report," she wrote. "Please can we talk?"

My student was distressed and needed help from me just to understand what was going on. It's likely a situation many educators and learners have faced since this report came out.

For many of us, this past year since Black Lives Matter, and the Windrush scandal before that, had led us to hope that people were really reading, learning and finally discussing at length the deep and complex questions of race and racism.

But this report feels like it takes us backwards. Worse than that – it denies that institutional and structural racism even exist, laying responsibility at the door of individuals instead.

Novelist Toni Morrison once said: "The very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being."

That's what this report does. It distracts us with other issues, without actually tackling the problems that exist. It forces people

who experience racism to justify their experiences as that, rather than suggesting effective solutions.

**"The report forces people who experience racism to justify their experiences"**

For instance, saying that white working-class pupils "trail behind their peers in almost all ethnic minority groups" to indicate that institutional racism does not exist in education is disingenuous.

For a start, it pits class against race. But "white working class" is also a very crude proxy for social disadvantage. It's far too loaded a term, that is poorly defined. For instance, there is a huge attainment gap between white children receiving free school meals, and those who are not. This is problematic, and needs deeper examination, but by positioning the "white working class" versus

"higher-achieving minority ethnic" we do a disservice to all those groups.

It's also not clear why the report focuses mainly on attainment. It touches on exclusions, saying the causes are "complex and multifaceted and cannot be reduced to structural racism and individual teacher bias".

No one is saying the causes aren't complex – but saying this means that teachers aren't unconsciously biased, or that structural racism isn't playing a part, makes no sense. Has the commission really proven they aren't?

Other issues just aren't tackled. We know young people from minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be in care and more likely to be given a diagnosis of special educational needs. Yet the report does not examine this.

Similarly, the report doesn't explain why, if minority ethnic groups largely do well in attainment at school or college, huge gaps appear in their outcomes post compulsory education.

We know on average they are awarded lower degrees at university, are less likely to get into Russell Group universities, are barely represented at the top of FTSE 100 and are under-represented among leading professions.

We know they are more likely to be stopped and searched by the police and to be in prison. Research still shows that you are more likely to get a job interview if your name is Michael and not Mohammed.

A further distraction is this idea that as a country we are an exemplar. The report says, "It is important to see how the UK has improved race relations more rapidly than in other countries." Does a school or college say, "Everywhere else is rubbish, so let's congratulate ourselves instead of aspiring to become an outstanding provider?" No. So why should the nation?

So instead of a deep and nuanced examination of issues and how we might do better, the report has recommended a longer school day and better careers advice. It has placed the responsibility firmly at the door of individuals and families to exercise their agency better.

The fallout could be that some schools and colleges may now no longer see tackling racism as the same high priority they did.

Not only does this report, through distraction, deny the lived experience of many minority ethnic people, it is spectacularly badly timed.



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Company



## If your college isn't in a careers hub, here's the evidence it should be

**Colleges already do well with employer links, but new research shows they have a better chance with the hub model, writes Oli de Botton**

Helping young people find their right next steps is difficult at the best of times. In the middle of a pandemic, the task becomes critical.

Careers education that is college-led, employer-shaped and focused on removing barriers for young people must be part of the answer – and often already is.

The Careers & Enterprise Company was set up in 2015 to help colleges and schools deliver brilliant careers education, and at the end of February I joined as the new chief executive.

I'd founded School 21 in east London and, as head, had tried to put employer partnerships and skills such as oracy at the heart of our mission.

Since the pandemic, the Careers & Enterprise Company has seen a growing interest in its work – not least because of worries that young people will feel the long-term “scarring” effects of missing out on opportunities so early on.

We've had the privilege of partnering with incredible college careers leaders, governors and senior staff. Although in education it is easy to both over- and under-claim, careers education in FE is on the move.

Half of England's FE colleges are now part of our growing network of “careers hubs”.

First set up in areas of high need, careers hubs are local clusters of schools, colleges, employers and other partners who share practice, provide opportunities for young people and make sure careers education reflects the local economy.

Hubs also access extra training. Around 150 FE careers leaders have now taken part in professional development, with one-third completing a higher level 7 qualification.

This is all driving changes on the ground. The majority of careers leaders in hubs now report that young people have better employability skills and are more likely to consider apprenticeship routes. Hubs give young people access to more meaningful encounters with employers. We also know careers education in special schools and alternative provision improves when they are in hubs.

Across schools and colleges more generally, 3.3 million young people are now having regular encounters

with employers, up 70 per cent in two years.

Employer partnerships are also growing as leaders draw on strategic support from our network of 3,600 “enterprise advisers”, who are senior business volunteers.

### “Careers education in FE is on the move”

In Carmel College in Darlington, for example, the team works with global engineering firm Jacobs to help them shape their careers programme. Staff receive more support, and students have a clearer line of sight into the world of work as a result.

So the emerging evidence is clear. Many colleges may ask why this sort of support is needed, when they already have strong links with business. But the longer colleges are in our network of careers hubs, the

higher they are performing against all eight Gatsby Benchmarks, which set standards for best practice in careers education.

In fact, colleges inside hubs achieve almost twice as many benchmarks as those outside. And the higher they are performing, the better the long-term outcomes for students.

This month, research from the University of Derby showed the impact of meeting the Gatsby Benchmarks. Across 16 colleges and schools in the north-east, significant increases were seen in how prepared young people were for work and how likely they were to achieve their learning outcomes. Students saw a 39 per cent increase in their “career readiness score”.

But there is more to do. We are determined to roll out our hub model to every corner of the country. We also want to partner with more colleges and have been working with The Association of Colleges. But we're also developing a virtual community to bring together hundreds of FE careers practitioners, so they can share best practice and innovate together.

And we will be aligning more closely with the National Careers Service, promoting it widely across our network.

Every young person deserves the best possible start to their working life. Careers education plays an important part in making that possible, and colleges could not be more important in making that vision a reality.





## TOM BEWICK

Chief executive,  
Federation of  
Awarding Bodies

## Whitehall is failing as a moral leader on apprenticeship targets

**Whitehall chiefs, headteachers and local government leaders should have their performance and pay incentives linked to hitting the target, writes Tom Bewick**

Did you hear about this year's April Fools' joke over at the Department for Education? A senior official walked into the secretary of state's office and said: "Minister, I'm pleased to report that we've met every single target on apprenticeships that we set ourselves in 2015." "That's amazing! How come?", replied Gavin Williamson. "We haven't really, minister, we've missed every single one of them, but don't worry, we'll just change the goal posts and give ourselves another year!"

As *FE Week* reported recently, nearly all parts of the public sector – other than the armed forces – have failed to meet the 2.3 per cent target that was first enshrined in statutory guidance on April 7, 2017. The original reporting period and timeframe to comply with the law expired this week, on March 31, 2021.

Rather like a flaky student who regularly posts a late essay under the lecturer's door at five past midnight, Whitehall knew it would fail to meet its own target.

So, it has simply taken the liberty of self-extending the deadline. Those more sympathetic to the mandarins will, of course, cite the vagaries of the pandemic. Cut



them some slack, they'll say.

But I'm less generous.

As with any serious delinquent, you have to look at the pattern of behaviour. This is not an isolated incident. The big ambition for apprenticeships was actually stated in 2015, when the old Department for Business, Innovation and Skills published its Vision 2020 document.

It was drafted on behalf of ministers by Jennifer Coupland, boss at the current Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, in the days when she was still in the department.

The vision statement was designed to crown the 2015 Conservative manifesto target of three million apprentices by 2020 (the target that's been missed).

The six chapters contained all the usual buzzword bingo lines we've become accustomed to reading.

Employers would be "in the driving seat". Expansion would take place while "quality would improve".

There would be a "simpler funding system" designed to

incentivise more firms to offer apprenticeships, "particularly for younger people" at risk of unemployment. Indeed, under-25s were to be the main focus of the expansion effort.

Five years on, the numbers of starts for young people has plummeted, from 123,000 in 2016-17 to 76,300 by 2020 (pre-pandemic).

### "The government has a cavalier attitude towards the targets"

Crucially, ministers promised that the public sector would "lead by example", by meeting the statutory minimum 2.3 per cent target.

The fact that this and many other apprenticeship policy targets since 2015 have been missed is what is so frustrating about the government's cavalier attitude. The bigger picture is this: England

already has one of lowest numbers of apprentices proportionally to employed persons among comparable countries, at 18 per 1,000 employees (2019 figures).

Germany has a ratio twice the England rate, at 40 apprentices per 1,000. Even Australia had a much higher recorded ratio, of 39 per 1,000 employees.

This really matters, because if the government can't deliver as an employer, operating via the public sector (schools, local government and hospitals), then how on earth can it be a moral leader when it comes to exhorting the private sector to hire apprentices?

The Treasury has belatedly realised this, with the recent Budget announcement to gear more financial incentives to new apprenticeship and traineeship hires, including helping those laggard public sector employers.

Ultimately, I believe the 2.3 per cent target needs to be enforced in the following ways: permanent secretaries of Whitehall departments should have their performance bonus payments explicitly linked to the achievement of the apprenticeship target.

The same for quango chiefs, headteachers and local government leaders. Only when there are some real personal and financial repercussions for failing in this endeavour will we find out whether those entrusted to lead our public sector are really up to the job.



## READER'S REPLY

### Can the government fix the 'confusing' careers landscape?



I've become an unofficial route to careers info on a near daily basis for friends' and families' children who are finding it difficult to understand options available to them at 16+. Says a lot about the lack of structure that I'm the best they've got.

**Louise Doyle, Twitter**

### Treasury to blame for adult education clawback plans



For city centre colleges with large ESOL provision, there needs to be enhanced flexibility, particularly for those who have never been out of lockdown.

**Jo Maher, Twitter**



It doesn't bode well for the white paper. There seems to be a deep disconnect between DfE and the Treasury, with the Treasury clearly dominating. I have no faith that anyone in the Treasury has any experience, or understanding of the challenges we have all experienced this year. They've all come through an academic route and clearly just don't get it. Tragic that such valuable provision is being undermined when it is needed most.

**Bob Smith, website**



This is right. Our organisation has waiting lists of learners who want to do courses, but we do not have the funds. We write to the colleges giving them hundreds of learners, they do not want to know. Get the money back to the communities where it is needed the most.

**Zaighum, website**

## REPLY OF THE WEEK

### Can the government fix the 'confusing' careers landscape?



We know where we want to get to – current, good advice available to all. Young people's choices often very influenced by families who need to hear the advice as well. But not easy to get this right for everyone – and not ever forgetting including adults too.

**Anne Milton, Twitter**

### Apprenticeship standard achievement rate fails to hit 60%



The DfE commentary suggests that part of the reduction in success rates is due to end-point assessment (EPA), but the statistics show that EPA pass rates are extremely high. So what is happening here? Traditionally the provider has been held solely responsible for success rates, but an examination of leave reasons suggests that in the last year more apprentices are withdrawing from programme for employment-focused reasons, such as redundancy.

**Jill Whittaker, website**



Fully agree that success rates are a strong indicator of quality and they must be higher across the apprenticeship sector, especially post reforms. However, not certain now is the right time to make that challenge. These figures, especially construction, massively impacted by Covid-19.

**Allan Milne, Twitter**

# Bulletin

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## Movers & Shakers

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



### Gill Alton

Board member, Hull and East Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership

**Start date:** April 2021

**Concurrent job:**

Chief executive, TEC Partnership

**Interesting fact:**

She backpacked around the world for a year and while on her trip, she had an emergency landing in a hot air balloon in the Australian Outback.



### David Alexander

Principal, Gateshead College

**Start date:** June 2021

**Previous job:**

Vice principal, West College Scotland

**Interesting fact:**

He is a qualified accountant and has held board positions for the Scottish Funding Council, Victim Support Scotland, and the General Teaching Council for Scotland.



### Frances Wadsworth

Interim FE Commissioner, Department for Education

**Start date:** April 2021

**Previous job:**

Deputy FE Commissioner, Department for Education

**Interesting fact:**

She says her Down's Syndrome sister, Ruth, has been "my touchstone" throughout life.

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FEWEEK

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