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HIGHLIGHTS FROM AAC 2021

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FE WEEK

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Apprenticeships before, during and after a global pandemic

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The seventh Annual Apprenticeship Conference (AAC) was like none before – literally – as we swapped the two-day in-person event at Birmingham's ICC for a five-day virtual conference due to Covid-19.

Despite putting a stop to face-to-face events, the pandemic did not falter the occasion.

Across the week, conference had over 1,500 apprenticeship employers and providers in attendance, staged over 130 sessions including workshops, plenaries and demos featuring over 100 speakers. In total, 75 hours of content was broadcast.

The impact of Covid-19, unsurprisingly, featured heavily among the discussions that involved all the usual industry bigwigs.

Starts have expectedly taken a hit since the start of the pandemic: they totalled 393,400 in 2018/19 but dropped by 18 per cent to 322,600 in 2019/20, with younger apprentices and

level 2 being affected the most. And in the first of 2020/21, 161,900 starts were recorded compared to 198,600 in the same period the previous year – another 18 per cent fall.

But with the prime minister Boris Johnson giving apprenticeships a central role in the country's recovery strategy, will we see a swift revival in the numbers?

Skills minister Gillian Keegan certainly thinks so, as she expressed during a keynote speech on day one of conference (**see page 4**). One of her predecessors and now chair of the education select committee Robert Halfon echoed similar sentiments as he urged for the "battle-cry" coming out of Covid-19 to be "skills, skills, skills" (**page 11**).

On the same day as Keegan, we heard from Ofqual's interim chief regulator Simon Lebus (**page 5**) who addressed the functional skills backlog as well as the latest on external quality assurance.

Next up we heard from business (**page 6**) with Confederation of British Industry

chief UK policy director Matthew Fell calling for a new "broader skills and training levy" to replace the apprenticeship levy, a policy which shadow education secretary Kate Green also believes is in need of major reform (**page 10**).

Jennifer Coupland, the chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, also took to the stage and tackled the question of whether England has too many apprenticeship standards as the number hits the 600 mark – an issue later tackled by a panel of sector experts (**page 7**).

Chief Ofsted inspector Amanda Spielman used her speech to express concerns about the quality of apprenticeship training (**page 8**), which is a problem the inspectorate has commonly raised since the 2017 reforms.

The conference was also rich with content from lively deep dive panels (such as on **pages 12 and 14**) and workshops (**see pages 13 and 15**) and a virtual ceremony to announce this year's AAC awards finalists to top it all off (**see page 16**).



FEWEEK aelp

AAC 2021

APPRENTICESHIP AWARDS

GALA DINNER & AWARDS EVENING

Thursday 8 July

ICC, Birmingham

Part of the

AAC 2021 | **ANNUAL APPRENTICESHIP CONFERENCE & EXHIBITION**

AACAPPRENTICESHIPAWARDS.COM

At the FE Week Annual Apprenticeship Conference (AAC) in 2020 we all gathered in Birmingham knowing that it was highly likely the impact of being hit by a global health pandemic would shut down the country for a short while. However, never in a million years did I think that we would have spent the majority of the next year in lockdown, and that the impact would still be as significant in 2021 meaning that we would be running a virtual AAC as a result this year.

Although we can now begin to look to recovery and the future, with a badly damaged economy and a huge increase in the numbers of unemployed, we will live with the impact of this pandemic for decades to come. It literally has left many of this country's business and political leaders scratching their proverbial heads about how we rebuild, where do we start and focus our efforts and now even more limited resources. The answer (as far as I am concerned) to this question is – Skills! Surely by now it is clear to everyone that reskilling will play a critical part in the recovery of the country and ultimately lead us back to a position of prosperity.

“We need to inject a real dose of pragmatism of the broader skills landscape”

As we face the task ahead of us, never has there been a time in recent memory when apprenticeships felt more vitally important to the future of our industries and our workforce. Apprenticeships can clearly serve an altruistic purpose, allowing the many young people who have been left without work to get into a job, as well as those older workers, who have been displaced by the impact of the pandemic to retrain and enter a career in a new industry.

However, looking to the longer term,

KIRSTIE DONELLY MBE

CEO, City & Guilds Group



An opportunity to look to recovery and the future of apprenticeships

apprenticeships could, and should, also be used to help stimulate our economy by creating the in-demand skills that employers truly need to repair and to grow. These will include much needed 'green' and digital skills as well as filling skills gaps in industries that are set to grow in the coming years such as the health and social care, infrastructure, transport and rail sectors. Importantly, these are also sectors where apprenticeships could be used to tackle social injustices by diversifying the workforce and driving up social mobility, providing people with the opportunity to gain the in demand skills that will boost their earning potential and ensuing businesses have the diversity of thought needed to make sure they stay relevant and authentic in the modern world.

We all know that there has been a significant drop in the number of apprenticeships starts in the past year, not least due to the impact of the pandemic, and it's simply unrealistic to say that employers should take on apprentices in the current climate if their business is struggling for survival. That's why we at City & Guilds believe that we need to see a temporary loosening of the restrictions around the levy to allow employers to spend

their levy on apprentice wages. At City & Guilds we have been calling for a number of years for the levy to be made into a broader skills levy to allow employers to gain the skills they truly need which, controversial to say at an apprenticeship conference, might not always be in the form of an apprenticeship. We need more than ever flexible skills programmes. At the same time, we also need to 'protect' the rigour and quality of what an Apprenticeship stands for so it retains it is regarded as a 'stamp of quality'.

We need to inject a real dose of pragmatism of the broader skills landscape, look at the bigger picture and consider the very best ways to help people get the skills they need to get into good work right now, and how to help employers get the workforces they need to thrive in a Post Covid and Post Brexit world.

I am delighted that the AAC has been able to run this year, despite Covid restrictions, as I truly believe it is an important platform for debate, discussion, insight and learning takes place, to keep us all pushing forward as a whole sector united in a passion for apprenticeships and the value they can bring to society, individuals and businesses.

Keegan: Apprenticeships are 'more important than ever'

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Apprenticeships will be "more important than ever" in helping businesses to grow after the pandemic, the skills minister told conference.

Gillian Keegan used her speech on day one to tell delegates that apprenticeships and skills are a "key pillar" of the government's recovery strategy to help kickstart the nation.

She said the country has a "unique opportunity to recast our skill system, putting employers and local needs, at the core of what we do, and we must seize this opportunity".

"We want to make sure that we are producing a pipeline of talent for businesses because many companies have told us that they are not able to recruit as many people with the skills that they need."

Keegan said that despite the pandemic, "almost 50,000 applications" have been submitted by employers for a cash boost for hiring an apprentice as a new employee "and I want to see this number increase even further".

Plugging the skills for jobs white paper, Keegan insisted "we need to take action today" and not "kick this into the long grass".

"Our reforms place employers at the heart of the skills system. By 2030, all technical courses will be based on employer-led standards, and we know that education and training has to work more closely with businesses to overcome chronic skill shortages.

"The task is on all of

us now to act, to help put the system in place."

She said she understood that "many of you will feel fatigued" by yet another government attempt to overhaul FE but pressed a message that "this time it has to be different".

"Since the first further education review took place in 1884, there have been countless reviews reports and proposals. However, almost none of these have been implemented, and certainly not implemented fully, and nor have led to the changes that we all want to see.

"This time it will be different. This time it has to be different.

"This time we will champion an ambitious approach that has flexibility and innovation at the heart of what we do, focus on employment standards that give people the skills they need to fill the jobs that businesses have and will have in the future. A commitment to apprenticeship standards that give employers confidence and apprentices the tools they need to be successful.

This is our goal. I look forward to working with you to make this a reality."

In a Q&A following her speech, the skills minister revealed that she has ordered an investigation into the "astonishingly" high drop-out rate for apprenticeship standards.

Official government data published in March showed that just 60.2 per cent of apprentices training on new-style standards stayed on their programme until the end in 2019/20. This figure sat at 48.3 per cent the year before.

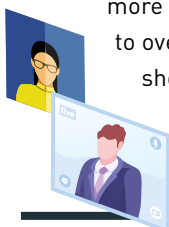
The retention rate on the old-style frameworks has stayed consistent at 69 per cent.

Keegan pledged to "look into this" and insisted she "won't stop" until the completion rate is "much, much higher".

The minister said she "couldn't understand" why this is happening as apprenticeships were seen as the "golden ticket" when she left school and the "last thing you would dream of is not finishing it".



Gillian Keegan



Awarding bodies ready to clear functional skills assessments backlog

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Ofqual is "confident" that awarding bodies have now suitably scaled up to offer remote functional skills assessments to clear the backlog of apprentices unable to sit the tests during the pandemic.

Interim chief regulator Simon Lebus told conference this was important as teacher-assessed grades for the qualifications are "not the ideal solution".

As previously reported by *FE Week*, tens of thousands of learners, particularly apprentices, have been stuck in limbo and unable to complete their functional skills programme due to Covid-19 restrictions since the start of the academic year.

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

After months of lobbying from the sector, the government finally confirmed in February that affected learners could receive a teacher-assessed grade, but only as a last resort.

Addressing the issue on day one of AAC, Lebus said: "I am glad that all awarding organisations have now been able to resume delivery of functional skills assessments with flexibilities in place to allow apprentices to progress when they are ready.

"These include remote assessment and invigilation options and the availability of teacher-assessed grades where it is not possible for a learner to access an assessment. This should allow learners quickly to progress to the next stage in life whether that be completing their apprenticeship and moving into employment or further study."

Lebus added that awarding bodies are now able to offer these on scale, but in "many cases" the constraint is at the centre end where the qualification is sat.

He continued: "But it shouldn't any longer be a big blocker and the backlog is unwinding.

"Other things being equal it is a matter both of fairness and preferable that apprentices do have the opportunity to take the real



qualification. I think teacher-assessed grades particularly for something like functional skills are not the ideal solution."

The interim chief regulator also used his speech to focus on the transition of external quality assurance (EQA) to Ofqual.

He said the sector is "well on the way to ensuring that the vast majority of apprentices are benefiting from regulated end-point assessments", a goal that has been discussed "for a long time" and which should be realised "by the end of 2022".

Lebus said Ofqual is now the EQA provider for over 200 standards, which will increase to over 300 by the end of this year. By the end of the transition period, the regulator will be responsible for the EQA of more than 500 standards, offered by potentially over 120 end-point assessment organisations (EPAOs).

The regulator currently has 27 applications for recognition from EPAOs under review and over 60 working on their applications for recognition, which they expect to be submitted soon.

Lebus admitted that applications and recognition have been "rather slower than we would have wished", which is "perhaps no surprise given the other challenges many EPAOs have faced in dealing with Covid-19".

He reminded delegates that

EPAOs who are delivering standards that are EQA'd by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education now have until 1 July 2021 to apply for recognition and until 16 December to complete the process.

"If you are an EPAO listening to this, we recommend that you submit your application to us as soon as possible, and that you make use of your contact at Ofqual and the resources we have available to support you," Lebus said.

He added that Ofqual has focused so far on transferring standards where the IfATE is the EQA provider, but the regulator is now also working with other EQA providers to plan the transfer of most other standards to Ofqual by the end of 2022.



CBI calls for 'broader skills and training levy'

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The apprenticeship levy has become a "perverse incentive" and needs to be turned into a broader "skills and training levy", according to the Confederation of British Industry.

Chief UK policy director for the major business representative group, Matthew Fell, said the levy is now a "barrier" to other quality forms of training that many firms are now "reluctant" to invest in.

The CBI has long lobbied for change as many big businesses which pay into the levy – those with an annual pay bill of over £3 million – struggle to spend their pots and see large chunks of their money go unused annually.

In a report published in October 2020, the employer membership organisation called time on the "failed experiment".

"Other types of training are increasingly becoming crucial to businesses"

Reiterating the group's concerns at conference, Fell said apprenticeships are a "great form of training and highly valued by employers", but they are "not always the best way to reskill workers".

"Other types of training, such as flexible and shorter courses, are increasingly becoming crucial to businesses. But many firms are reticent to

invest in further skills support until they've spent their full levy fund."

He continued: "That's why turning the apprenticeship levy into a broader skills and training levy in the comprehensive spending review is essential to support higher business investment in training for young people and older workers.

"A system which funds a wider range of high-quality accredited training would keep the 'use it or lose it' nudge and unblock investment in skills."

Fell also used his speech to flag the "huge concern" of young people who have "borne the brunt" of the drop in apprenticeship starts since the start of the pandemic.

And while he says there should be a big drive to reverse this trend, he warned it is "vital" that apprenticeships remain open to people of all ages.

There have been warnings in recent years that the apprenticeships budget could soon go bust as employers choose more expensive standards at higher levels, and that "hard choices" about restricting usage of the levy could be brought in.

Addressing this at AAC, Fell said: "It is vital that apprenticeships also remain open as a way of learning at any stage of a career.

"The CBI's report Learning For Life published last year found that upskilling and retraining people to give them the skills they will need will cost an additional £130 billion by 2030.



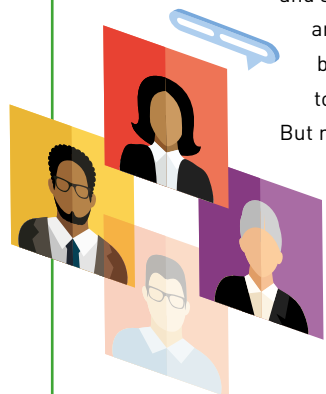
"Over the next decade, tasks, roles and entire jobs will be transformed by technology"

"Over the next decade, tasks, roles, and entire jobs will be transformed by technology. The crisis has just put this into sharper relief and accelerated the need to put reskilling at the top of government's agenda.

"So placing age restrictions on apprenticeship funding – for example, by making it only available for under 25s – would be completely at odds with the need for adult reskilling as a national priority."



Matthew Fell



Does England have too many apprenticeship standards?

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The boss of the Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education defended the number of standards offered in England after they hit the 600 mark.

Jennifer Coupland told conference: "I firmly disagree with claims there are too many apprenticeships.

"I am confident that our employer led all-age and all-level approach is right for the country," she argued, adding: "The spread of levels reflects the nation's true skills needs."

Earlier this year sector leaders voiced concerns about the number of apprenticeships, which are replacing old-fashioned apprenticeship frameworks.

Federation of Awarding Bodies chief executive Tom Bewick said in January that English apprenticeships had "lost their way," while others highlighted how the number of apprenticeship standards available in England is far beyond the number in countries like Germany, which has a skills system education secretary Gavin Williamson is looking to emulate and outmatch.

Coupland used her conference speech to say that while "we've learned a lot from Germany", their economy and training needs "are different to ours, so it wouldn't be it wouldn't make sense to replicate them".

Speaking during a deep dive debate on whether there should be more or less standards, later on the same day, NOCN Group chief executive Graham Hasting-Evans said Germany has 344 apprenticeships on the go, but there were "great variances" across the globe.

He was "less worried" about the total number of apprenticeships than he was about issues such as career pathways,

over-specialisation in the programmes, and a lack of progress for updating them.

How apprenticeships had become over-specialised was a point picked up by the Association of Employment and Learning Provider's chief policy officer Simon Ashworth.

He told the deep dive "we should celebrate the diverse range of programmes," and not get "too hooked up" on the number of courses.

Instead, the discussion should be around whether "we got the right mix and the right blend".

Bewick was also on the panel and admitted Coupland had "got a point when she says it's not about the volume per se of standards.

"It's whether or not the efficacy, the quality of the take up is really there with the standards that we've got."

Corrina Hembury, managing director of Access Training, told delegates the system is "about right in terms of the number," and the sector needed to focus on keeping the standards "relevant," highlighting how there were some apprenticeships which were five or six years into their three-year cycle for a review.

Yet the primacy of quality over

quantity was not a view universally shared by speakers at the deep dive.

Ross Radford, lead practitioner for apprenticeships and learner progress at major college group NCG, worried there were "possibly going to be too many" standards.

He said having around 700 standards would create around 45 pathways, which would be "a substantial amount to maintain and to ensure that the quality of the curriculum is right, but also to ensure the apprentice gets the best possible experience".

The IfATE indicated it will be taking its foot off the accelerator to approve standards, after spending the last few years "developing a corpus of standards," according to its deputy director for standards development Jonathan Mitchell, also speaking at the deep dive.

He said there is "an opportunity right now for us to take a step back and look at whether that's right".

This would include looking at whether programmes had become overly-specialised, as well as over-generalised.



Jennifer Coupland

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Ofsted's chief inspector shared some "common issues" that are "tripping up providers" as she warned the quality of apprenticeship training "does need to improve".

Amanda Spielman told delegates that since the restart of new provider monitoring visits in mid-March, a third of almost 100 inspections has resulted in at least one 'insufficient progress' judgment.

"And let's be frank," she said, "this can't be blamed on Covid" as it is the same pattern the inspectorate was seeing before the pandemic.

To have "such a high" proportion of insufficient progress judgments is "troubling".

Ofsted has repeatedly warned that apprenticeship training quality is not improving in recent years.

The watchdog's 2020 annual report, for example, said apprenticeships were the "weakest" area of provision in FE providers, with one in ten full inspections judged 'inadequate' last year.

"Without this, apprentices don't understand their career options post-apprenticeship"

Spielman offered AAC delegates an insight into regular areas that lead to poor-quality apprenticeship training.

"In the same way that those who build ambitious curriculums tend to do well, those that are overly reliant on standard training programmes don't always serve their apprentices as well as they could," she said.

"Apprentices then don't get the

Improve quality of apprenticeship training, Ofsted chief tells providers

opportunity to develop their wider knowledge and interests beyond the standard or framework. And replicating standard programmes without working with employers and taking local context into account can produce cohorts of apprentices who don't have the knowledge or skills required in their local job market."

A "linked problem" Ofsted sees is a lack of high-quality careers guidance.

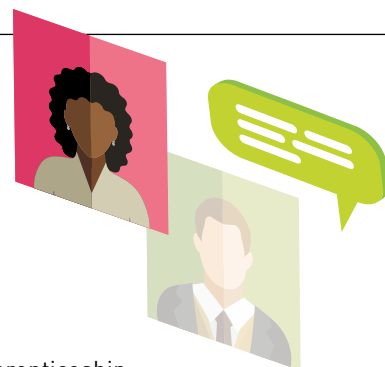
"Without this, apprentices don't understand their career options post-apprenticeship, either in their organisation or the wider industry."

Spielman said providers need to go beyond just getting apprentices through their training programme – they need to "work with employers and their own apprentices to make sure they truly do gain the right knowledge, skills and behaviours to make their next steps successfully, and to thrive in a professional environment".

The chief inspector said the watchdog will be continuing with its programme of new provider monitoring visits throughout the summer, prioritising providers that haven't had a visit before.

Ofsted is also planning to resume full education inspection framework (EIF) inspections to apprenticeship providers who have not yet received their first inspection following a new provider monitoring visit.

Spielman said she welcomed the changes that the Education and Skills Funding Agency has made to the requirements to be accepted on to the register of apprenticeship training providers, but "we know there is still much to do to get the quality of



apprenticeship training to where we all want it to be".

"Although it does take some work, a higher bar for entry onto the register is in everyone's interest. Initially, some providers were just not good enough to make the grade and so it's right to refresh the register and not make the same mistakes again.

"And it's in all of our interests for the quality of training to be high – irrespective of the subject you're training for, the training provider you're working with, or the level of your apprenticeship."



Amanda Spielman

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Labour would prioritise greener and more local apprenticeship system

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Labour's shadow education secretary set out how a greener, more local apprenticeship system with a "fundamental" review of the levy would be a priority for the political party if it enters government.

Speaking on the Thursday, Kate Green also attacked the Conservative government for "failing to build a skills system fit for the 21st century", and instead "pushing it to crisis point".

She said since the apprenticeship levy was introduced the number of new apprentices has "plummeted, with the number of new starts down by over a third compared to five years ago".

The number of learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, Green added, had halved in five years; compared to a 17 per cent fall in starts by learners from the least disadvantaged backgrounds.

The number of female starts had also fallen by 40 per cent, versus 30 per cent for men, she added.

Quality of training, as it had been for many other speakers, was also in Green's sights: "Too often apprentices do not receive the gold standard training that they should expect and deserve."

"Too often they don't get support to progress through their training."

"Too many do not even get paid their minimum wage – that is quite simply shocking."

The Labour MP said she was "astonished" to hear skills minister Gillian Keegan tell the conference she was shocked by the apprentice

drop-out rate.

"It is a stark reminder that even as the apprenticeships system is not delivering for thousands of people every year, the Conservatives at Westminster have been content with business as usual, whatever the cost for those who need these opportunities," Green argued.

Labour, she said, was "absolutely clear that putting skills and training foremost is essential to our recovery from the pandemic".

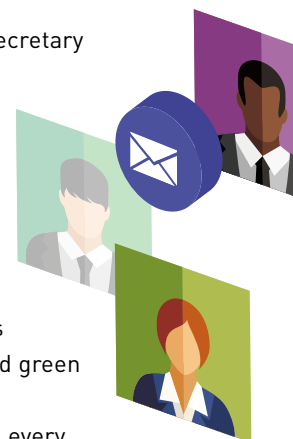
This would start with a reform of the levy, with a "fundamental review" of the system so it "ensures those most in need of training can access it, and that there is genuine support for learners to progress, so they are able to get to the starting gate for high-quality apprenticeships, including via traineeships".

Investment in the skills system must also "secure our economy, ending the inequality and insecurity that has scarred the last decade of working people's lives," as well as building a "high-skilled" and high-wage" economy "we need for the future".



The education secretary highlighted Labour's aim to have a more environmentally friendly economy and the party's plan "to create 400,000 green jobs as part of a fair and green recovery".

All business and every region of the country must benefit from a reformed levy, Green stated, saying local and regional leaders must be "empowered" to "build a skills system that creates quality jobs and ensure qualified people available to fill them in every town and city across the country".



"Too often they don't get support to progress through their training"

"Our metro mayors and combined authorities must have a major role in supporting apprentices and apprenticeships so that the training system works hand in hand with regional and local regeneration and industrial strategies to revitalise regional and local economies."

Concluding her speech, Green said: "Nobody and nowhere should be left out or left behind as we rebuild our country."

"We cannot afford to waste anyone's potential. Training and skills are essential to transform lives, communities, our economy, and our future prospects."

"That will be a priority for the next Labour government."

Halfon: Battle-cry coming out of Covid must be 'skills, skills, skills'

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All new public sector recruits should be offered an apprenticeship and multi-millionaire philanthropists should start donating to FE, the chair of the education select committee has said.

Robert Halfon, who is also a former skills minister, told conference the country's focus has been on "university, university, university" for too long and he hopes the "battle-cry" coming out of the pandemic will be "skills, skills, skills".

To do this he called for "impetus, evangelisation, and action" from the top to create the opportunities, including the employment of "millions" of apprentices from businesses and the public sector.

"We must reverse the decline in participation and offer a way forward"

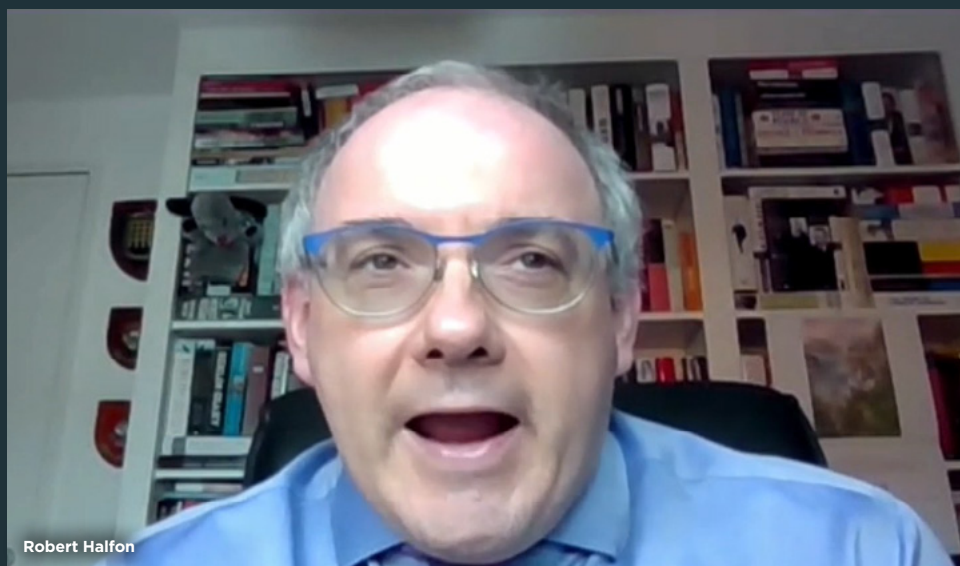
Currently, all public sector bodies with 250 or more staff in England have been bound to a target to employ an average of at least 2.3 per cent of their staff as new apprentice starts over the period of April 1, 2017 to March 31, 2021.

Halfon believes this target is "unambitious and sends all the wrong signals".

"Instead, the sector should be leading the way," he said.

"Where possible, all new recruits should be offered an apprenticeship. And, on procurement (dare I mention the word), the number of apprentices a company must employ should feature in the criteria for awarding contracts."

The MP for Harlow also warned there is "no



use creating the opportunities unless young people know how to take advantage of them" as he called for strengthened careers advice.

He said the application process for studying in further education should be "as well signposted and encouraged in schools as it is for HE", which means establishing a "proper UCAS for FE".

"This will be essential if the government is serious about building parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes, right from the get-go."

Halfon went on to reiterate his committee's call for the government to "urgently address underfunding in further education" and said colleges should be "accorded the same prestige and support as that of some of our great universities".

He looked to multi-millionaire philanthropists who "queue up to donate" to traditional universities and claimed that England "will change" when "they do the same for FE".

Halfon also used his speech to plug his committee's recent report on adult education, stating that poor access to lifelong learning is "one of the great social injustices of our time".

"Six million adults are not qualified to level 2. Nine million working age adults in England have poor literacy or numeracy skills or both. And nine million adults lack the basic digital skills which are essential for getting on in modern life," he said.

"We must reverse the decline in participation and offer a way forward for these left-behind adults."

He went on to call on government to fund an adult community learning centre in every town, and for the reintroduction of individual learning accounts funded through the National Skills Fund.



Panel: Make diverse apprentices feel like they belong

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The importance of making apprentices from diverse backgrounds feel like they belong in the workplace was tackled by a panel of diversity experts.

The topic was introduced by host of The Guilty Feminist podcast and comedian Deborah Frances-White, who told the conference “a lot of businesses think inclusion stops at recruitment.

“But I think there are many places where we’re technically included but we don’t feel like we belong.”

To illustrate this, she used the example of someone going along to their partner’s school reunion: “Your name is on the door, perhaps you get a name badge or half a glass of warm white wine on entry, you’re definitely included.

“But do you belong at your partner school reunion, absolutely not.

“There are many places where we’re technically included but we don’t feel like we belong”

“Because any school reunion is about a collection of shared experiences and memories.”

She warned delegates “there are many apprentices who feel like really they’re at someone else’s school reunion”.

To tackle this, she suggested focusing on “belonging” as well as diversity and inclusion.

This comes as the apprenticeship sector continues to struggle with



making itself more diverse: *FE Week* reported last October how the proportion of BAME 16- to 18-year-old apprentices made up just 7.7 per cent of starts in the first three-quarters of 2019/20.

Speaking before Frances-White, City & Guilds chief executive Kirstie Donnelly spelt out the current situation to delegates.

She quoted Office for National Statistics data showing that between October and December 2020, 41 per cent of black people aged 16 to 24 were unemployed, “the highest rate since the last financial crisis.

“We simply have to address this and work much harder to create more equity in apprenticeships for people from ethnic minority groups,” she said.

Frances-White’s ideas on belonging were warmly welcomed by members of a panel discussion held after hers and Donnelly’s talks.

Jeff Greenidge, director of diversity of the Association of Colleges and the Education and Training Foundation, posed the questions: “Do we check on a regular basis whether people do feel as though they belong, whether people

do feel as though they’re included, and if not, then do we make those changes towards strategy?”

He said the college workplace “had no choice” but to be diverse as their client group is, so the only opportunity they have is “what leg up do we give individual people to help them to take that next step?”

During the session, conference delegates were invited to answer a poll question on whether their business had a diversity and inclusion strategy.

Ninety per cent answered they did, but this did not impress panellist and Apprenticeship Diversity Champions Network chair Lia Nici MP, who was surprised the number was “quite low”.

But she said it was “no good having a strategy, and then doing business in exactly the same way.

“You have to actually do something different; you have to communicate with people from a wider base”.

Though she admitted this can be difficult for private businesses, which employ based on “essential need” rather than for strategic reasons – so businesses had to be encouraged to think about this more strategically.

The challenges that lie ahead for apprenticeships

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What challenges lie ahead for apprenticeships were tackled by a group of employers at a workshop led by City and Guilds on Friday.

The workshop, entitled 'Sharing Best Practice on what makes a Good Quality Apprenticeship Experience', featured representatives from BAE Systems, Sainsbury's and Siemens.

It was hosted by City and Guilds' funding and policy senior manager Bryony Kingsland with the organisation's strategic commercial manager Paula Gibson.

Mark Donnelly, head of apprenticeships and skills for BAE Systems, warned with high youth employment in the wake of the pandemic, "I can see there being quite a challenge to make sure there's sufficient employment opportunities created for apprenticeships".

The challenges facing how apprenticeships were perceived, its brand, was also on the minds of the panellists.

Donnelly said the brand is "something that we're always striving as a as a collective group of individuals to push forward".

He thinks focusing on the "brand reputation and confidence" is "a challenge that we need to keep

pushing forward".

Ruth Jennings, skills development programmes manager for Sainsbury's, said the brand "was on a journey" but she "no longer has to have so many conversations about the fact that apprenticeships are not for 16 to 18-year-old hairdressers and plumbers".

She believes "the greater the stories around impact and change," the bigger the improvement on the brand's value.

Siemens' training and development manager Gert Rohrmann said he feels the message on apprenticeships "still has not sunk in," and they were still seen as an alternative to university, rather than a "de facto" route.

The university connection had the effect of pushing away younger learners, especially at lower levels, he argued.

Another challenge Rohrmann raised was that of reflecting on apprenticeship standards "that need to be changed to adapt to a hybrid model of learning".

Further to that, Jennings said Sainsbury's had seen "unprecedented" change so: "We need to make sure our apprenticeship offer is still fit for purpose, so that we can have programmes that give us the skills we as employers need and the behaviours and knowledge to support our

colleagues to be brilliant."

She confessed to worrying about whether "we have got an offer that is going to evolve at the pace of change that we need as employers".

Part of the changes, she explained, involved linking in providers and end-point assessment organisations so they can "deliver in line at the right pace" for trailblazer groups.

Rohrmann said the sector "need to really focus" on making apprenticeships more flexible, rather than more controlled.

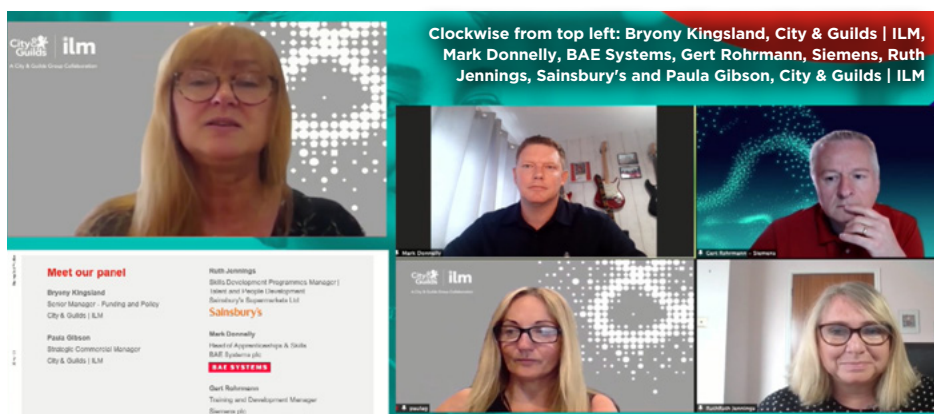
He urged government to "think of what the what the end result is, what the business needs, and then adapt and change the apprenticeships to make sure that the youngsters we develop are right for the business".

He said businesses want apprentices to "stick," after Donnelly earlier raised how new government figures have shown just 60.2 per cent of apprentices training on new-style standards stayed on their programme until the end in 2019/20. Donnelly said there was a "need to make sure" end-point assessment is "really adding the value that it needs to add".

Kingsland offered one solution to the challenges facing apprenticeships: "There's a lot of people whose sectors are either shrinking or have shrunk or challenged by automation that we know is coming over the next three to five years.

"So, I think there's a there's a point here isn't there about those transferable skills, which are really key."

Donnelly said BAE and the wider engineering community were focused on transferable soft skills, such as analytical and leadership attributes, as: "We can hone and teach the technical requirement, but those soft skills will be absolutely coming to the fore over the next five years or so, because of the technology advancements and the need to make the human count in all that process."



Tackling the end-point assessment challenge

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Professional football apprentices going through their first end-point assessment “faced a steep learning curve” studying through the Covid-19 pandemic, one conference deep dive heard.

The Premier League’s head of apprenticeships and academic progression Julia Caunt was one of the speakers discussing ‘Maintaining and Exceeding the Quality of End Point Assessment’ on Wednesday.

She said delivering EPA for the first time this year for their level 3 sporting excellence professional learners had been a challenge.

“It is an 18-month to two-year apprenticeship and this is the first time we’ve been able to put players through to the end-point assessments, and only since January as well.”

Players had prepared for this through mock assessments, and internal assessors have been making remote visits to clubs to check on what milestones learners had reached, Caunt said.

The standard has been granted flexibilities for its EPA, including being able to do a professional interview remotely, about which Caunt said: “We would actually like to see that continue if that’s at all possible.”

This was because it meant “easier access, it can be conducted in exactly the same way, and also validated and verified.”

“So we certainly will be taking some of that forwards.”

The apprenticeship was approved for delivery in May 2019 and Caunt said it helps players plan for a second career

once they retire from football, usually in their 30s.

“They will learn about performance analysis, sports science, nutrition, psychology, medicine, physiotherapy.”

“So there’s lots they can do and consider what they might like to do and part of the apprenticeship plans for their second career, what’s going to happen next.”

Other speakers on the panel discussed how demand for end-point assessment was increasing and how capacity needed rise to match that, especially during Covid-19.

Pearson’s senior EPA delivery manager Andy Pollard said ensuring sufficient capacity was the “million-dollar question,” in terms of balancing the number of apprentices wanting EPA with the number of independent end-point assessors.

He said the number of apprentices did dip during the pandemic, owing to furlough and delays to gateway evidence.

“But very quickly, once flexibilities came in, we did start to see an uptick.

Before Christmas time, we were back up to the projected

levels of assessment.

“Independent assessors were with us that whole time, so we were able to make sure apprentices were assessed in a timely manner.”

Natasha Ahmed, a second-year assistant practitioner apprentice at Blackburn Hospital, told the deep dive she had been worried “everything was going to come to a halt” once the pandemic struck.

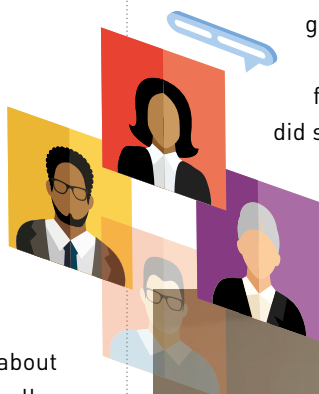
But by keeping organised and getting certificates signed off, she said her work has been “going good”.

“It’s just getting everything in order really, making sure that you’ve got plenty of time so you’re not overwhelmed at the end.”

Lindsey Robinson, academic lead for apprenticeships at the University of Central Lancashire, suspects nationally “there will be a rush across a whole range of apprenticeships” for EPA.

This was due to the “exceptional circumstances” where apprentices have been on breaks in learning, for instance.

In order to meet rising demand, Pollard said Pearson was now looking at creating strategic partnerships, with hubs developing people within employers into independent assessors so they can assess an apprentice at another employer.



Julia Caunt

Apprenticeships in the NHS during Covid

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How the Covid-19 pandemic had taught the NHS “great lessons” for their apprenticeships programme was explored by the service’s leading vocational education specialists at conference.

Health Education England national apprenticeship programme manager Lucy Hunte told a workshop on Monday they had to act to “minimise mass breaks in learning” at the start of the pandemic.

NHS protocol dictates when there is any incident, learning stops, so “we really had to work with trusts to make sure that, where possible, apprentices continue with their learning and their programme”.

However, by being creative, HEE was able to turn the mass deployment of apprentices to the frontline during the crisis to their advantage: they realised learners could credit that work as off-the-job learning.

So, Hunte said, by working with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education on end-point assessment flexibilities: “We ended up supporting almost 3,000 registered nurse and nursing associate apprentices to be released to support the frontline effort.”

She said it was “no mean feat” getting IT and their technology to “work at pace,” admitting it was not something the NHS is known for.

But Fay Lane, HEE’s apprenticeship relationship manager for the north-east and Yorkshire, said they had seen some “absolutely fabulous examples of where our trusts really embraced doing things virtually”.

Despite the initial response “being a

little bit panicked,” she said the majority of trusts were “really quick” to adapt apprenticeship education.

In the case of the employer providers, “they did this overnight, and were able to send their learners home and set them up on their e-portfolios very, very quickly”.

Another example of how quickly the service adapted was when trusts in South Yorkshire were able to switch to recruiting their first cohort of clinical coding apprentices wholly virtually.

Although it was “absolutely smack bang in the middle of when Covid arrived,” Lane said, the trusts said they did not want to delay the recruitment by months.

All the interviews were conducted by telephone and all the human resources checks were completed by phone or email.

“It meant that we only experienced weeks of slippage, rather than months,” Lane said, and had progressed digital recruitment in the service, rather than it being “something that we maybe were dipping our toe in the water early on.

Without Covid, she said: “I don’t think it would have happened, but it’s pushed us into that space and in a really positive way too.”

At the other end of the pandemic, Lane said trusts “have been really, really quick in bringing learners back into the workplace”.

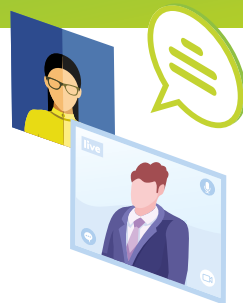
The NHS has also taken advantage of schemes such as Kickstart in training up the people who had lost their jobs in other sectors and had seen the service as an “employer that can provide stability,” Lane said.

Trusts were also seeking to target the “huge rush” of volunteers, who had come to help the NHS during the crisis, with other career opportunities.

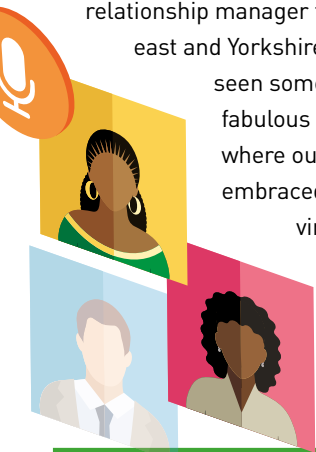
Jenny Stone, Lane’s counterpart in London, also told delegates about changes the service had made to its functional skills provision.

This involved introducing new software from bksb, meaning NHS and social care workers can log on through a device and undertake directed study to get them up to a level 2 in maths, English and digital skills.

The NHS is also piloting virtual and paper functional skills exams with Open Awards, free for NHS employers, after staff had found it “really difficult” booking onto exams, Stone said.



Lucy Hunte



Finalists announced for the 2021 AAC Apprenticeship Awards

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The national finalists for this year's *FE Week* and AELP AAC Apprenticeship Awards have been revealed.

From 350 entries the shortlists for the 21 awards, being run in partnership with Open Awards, were announced at a virtual ceremony hosted by comedian and impressionist Rory Bremner.

They will now go forward for the awards final, which will be held at a gala dinner in Birmingham on Thursday, July 8.

Shane Mann, managing director of *FE Week's* publisher Lsect, said: "These finalists are some of the very best of the apprenticeship sector and show just what can be achieved."

"The past year has placed an enormous strain on all our lives, both in our private lives and our places of work."

"The judges were astounded by the innovation, tenacity and thoughtfulness of apprenticeship providers and employers across the UK. These awards are just one of many ways we can show our appreciation and celebrate their exceptional work."

"In past years we've announced the national finalists during a parliamentary reception. This wasn't possible this year."

"But it was great to have Rory Bremner host this evening's special online presentation."

The big award, apprentice provider of the year, will go to either Cardiff and Vale College, Exeter College, Acacia Training and Salford City College.

Meanwhile, Lee Marley Brickwork, Merseyside Police, Pendennis Shipyard Ltd and the Royal Air Force will duke it out for apprentice employer of the year.

AELP chief executive Jane Hickie said it was "very difficult to choose the shortlist for

each category.

"As this year's array of finalists demonstrates, the fantastic training being delivered to young people and to existing employees who need to enhance their skills in the face of the pandemic and current economic uncertainty never ceases to amaze me."

"AELP partnered with *FE Week* on these awards as a way to demonstrate the amazing work done by providers in supporting their learners and employers – we certainly have many examples of outstanding work demonstrated across the sector."

A number of sector leaders are also in the running for the individual award for outstanding contribution to the development of apprenticeships.

These include Anthony Impey, chief executive of Be The Business; Andy Berry, principal of Bridgwater & Taunton College; Rob Colbourne, chief executive of Performance Through People; and Robert Watts, European apprenticeship and early talent programme manager for Covance Laboratories.

Tickets for the awards ceremony are now on sale from aacapprenticeshipawards.com



Full list of the National Finalists

Agriculture, Environmental & Animal Care Apprenticeship provider of the year Bridgwater & Taunton College Myerscough College Business & Administration Apprenticeship provider of the year Abingdon & Witney College Wiltshire College Care Services Apprenticeship provider of the year Aspiration Training Paragon Skills Catering & Hospitality Apprenticeship provider of the year Sponsored by  Bournemouth and Poole College Remit Training Construction Apprenticeship provider of the year City of Bristol College Kirklees College Digital Apprenticeship provider of the year Sponsored by  Gower College Swansea Manchester Met University Education & Childcare Apprenticeship provider of the year Exeter College Hawk Management (UK) Engineering & Manufacturing Apprenticeship provider of the year Gower College Swansea Make UK	Hair & Beauty Apprenticeship provider of the year Sponsored by  HAHA Training Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education London Hairdressing Apprenticeship Academy Health & Science Apprenticeship provider of the year Manchester Met University Petroc Skills Training UK Legal, Finance & Accounting Apprenticeship provider of the year Gower College Swansea Workpays Sales, Marketing, Procurement Apprenticeship Provider of the year Lifetime Training Remit Training Transport & Logistics Apprenticeship provider of the year Performance Through People Training Qube Learning Apprenticeship Diversity Award Coach Core Foundation Multiverse SEND Apprenticeship Champion Award Devon County Council Sheffield City Council Promoting Apprenticeships campaign of the year Carlisle College Luminate Education Group Weston College	Outstanding Contribution to the Development of Apprenticeships: Employer, provider and individual Sponsored by  EMPLOYER British Steel Fort Vale Health Education England Teledyne e2v PROVIDER Bridgwater & Taunton College Luminate Education Group Remit Training Wakefield College INDIVIDUAL Anthony Impey, CEO, Be The Business Andy Berry, Principal, Bridgwater & Taunton College Rob Colbourne, CEO, Performance Through People Robert Watts, European Apprenticeship and Early Talent Program Manager, Covance Laboratories Apprentice Employer of the year Lee Marley Brickwork Merseyside Police Pendennis Shipyard Ltd Royal Air Force Apprenticeship Provider of the year Cardiff and Vale College Exeter College Acacia Training Salford City College
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