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ANNUAL APPRENTICESHIP CONFERENCE & EXHIBITION 2022

FE WEEK

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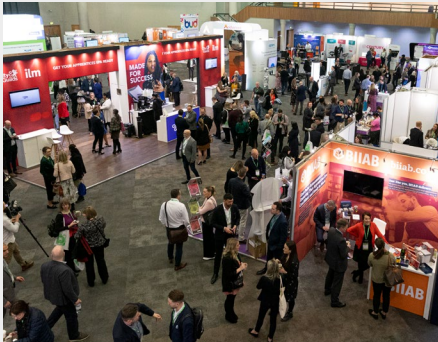
AAC was a show of strength for the apprenticeships sector

SHANE CHOWEN
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Over two days in Birmingham, more than 1,000 delegates and exhibitors got together for the first time in two years to discuss, learn and debate the big issues in apprenticeships. The sense of excitement and, in a way, relief that the event could go ahead at all reflects a sector that is eager to move forward from the challenges on the pandemic.

That eagerness and enthusiasm was palpable. If you were a delegate at this year's AAC, I hope you find that reflected in the pages of this special FE Week supplement.

Condensing the highlights of this year's



AAC has been a challenge because there was so much to talk about. As if recovery and catch-up from the pandemic wasn't enough, there are major policy issues to tackle, an economic crisis facing employers and some more familiar challenges around quality, regulation, compliance and funding.

We were delighted to host Alex Burghart for his first AAC appearance as the minister for skills. FE Week deputy editor Billy Camden has written up the highlights from the speech and his backstage chat with the minister about the important issue of apprentice pay in the context of the looming cost of living crisis.

It was also the first time that Nichola Hay, the new chair of AELP, was able to address the sector since taking office. You can read about her top three priorities as AELP chair in our round-up of main stage highlights on pages 10 and 11.

The main stage also hosted Jennifer Coupland, chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, Labour's shadow skills minister Toby Perkins, Association of Colleges boss David Hughes and star of BBC's The Apprentice Tim Campbell. You can find out what this



line-up had to say too in our main stage roundup.

Of course a highlight in the apprenticeships calendar is the AAC awards. The standard of nominations this year was high and gave our team of judges a tough time selecting the winners, which you can find on pages 12-13.

Finally, our summary of some of the breakout sessions will give you a flavour of the variety of sessions on offer at AAC including ask the inspectors, common audit errors, hybrid delivery and green apprenticeships.

See you at AAC 2023!



THE FE WEEK PODCAST PRESENTS ...||| EPISODE 2 |||... **DISABILITY:** THE HIDDEN DIVERSITY ISSUE?

**FOR
STAFF
BY
STAFF**

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**DAVID PHILLIPS**Managing Director,
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With more change on the horizon the Annual Apprenticeship Conference remains vitally important

The Annual Apprenticeship Conference (AAC) has been a fixture in the calendar of the education sector since its launch eight years ago, and 2022 saw a return to form after last years' event was forced online because of Covid. It was fantastic to get the opportunity to talk to peers from across the sector about what happens next in apprenticeships.

Following the reform of the apprenticeship system and the introduction of the levy in 2017, we have made a solid start in creating a system that better meets the needs of employers. But I'm sure that nobody would argue that is a perfect system yet. Listening to others speak at the AAC this year, the need for further reform of the system was a recurring theme.

It seems like Chancellor Rishi Sunak may have been listening. A few days after the conference he stated in his Spring statement that, despite the introduction of the levy, UK employers are still spending half the European average on training their employees. To address this, his intention over the coming months is to examine how the tax system, including the Apprenticeship Levy, can be better used to encourage employers to invest in adult training in the future.

However, it is important to note that this review will stop short of being a formal review of the system. We believe that whatever happens, it needs to be thorough enough to make sure the apprenticeship system is more broadly adopted and fulfil its potential to level up society and ensure it is fit-for-the-future.

A key issue is that the under-utilisation of existing levy funds still persists. For larger businesses, the inability to utilise all of the Levy funds through apprenticeships is understandably an ongoing source of frustration. And this is not new news. In our 2018 [Flex For Success?](#) report, produced in partnership with the CBI, we highlighted

that two fifths of businesses we surveyed had simply written off the levy as a tax. The same report found that 92% of employers would welcome more flexibility in how the levy could be spent, with 45% saying that if given more flexibility then they would spend the funds of non-apprenticeship training.

In response to this, we recommended the introduction of a broader skills levy which employers could spend on a government approved list of high-quality workforce training in in-demand skill areas, with a significant portion still ringfenced for apprenticeships.

To allow this to happen and still have enough funds available to create the number of high-quality apprenticeships required, it may be necessary to expand the levy, either by increasing the percentage of payroll assigned to training or by expanding the number of employers who contribute. This better funded system would also go some way to greater access to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, who continue to struggle to access the system due to an excess of red tape and insufficient levy funding.

In addition to not meeting the needs of all employers, the current Levy system is presenting barriers for people from

disadvantaged backgrounds. The [London Progression Collaboration](#) recently released figures which showed that the number of entry level apprenticeships has fallen by 72% since 2014-15, a trend that was exacerbated by the introduction of the Levy in 2017 when new starts fell by almost a quarter. In the future we might need Government to ring-fence some funds for entry level apprenticeships aimed at younger, entry level workers to support the levelling up agenda and allow the shockingly high 37% of economically inactive 16 – 24-year-olds to enter the labour market and fill much needed roles.

Overcoming the current issues impacting the apprenticeship system should not require a wholesale reinventing of the way we look at skills development. In our 2016 [Making Apprenticeships Work](#) report we identified some of the key challenges in implementing a highly efficient apprenticeship system and recommendations to address them, such as simplifying the application process for apprenticeships with a UCAS style system to put vocational training on equal footing to academic education in terms of accessibility, and ensuring that careers advice available to young people includes a detailed and informative view of what apprenticeships can offer. Making adjustments such as these and considering what is funded in the future to better meet employer needs will go a long way to ensuring that we have a system which will serve future generations effectively.

The work that we still have ahead of us reinforces the importance of the AAC, providing an opportunity for people from across the sector to collaborate and share ideas. Moving forward, symposia like these will remain a valuable opportunity to reflect on developments in the sector and how policy must change to reflect the evolving needs of employers and learners.



'We need you': Highlights from the skills minister's opening speech

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The skills minister has admitted the government "must" increase the number of young people starting apprenticeships and committed to "reduce friction" for small employers using the apprenticeships system.

But he confessed that the chancellor has no plans to reintroduce apprenticeship cash incentives for employers.

Alex Burghart used his speech to open up this year's Annual Apprenticeship Conference to outline his priorities when it comes to apprenticeships before taking questions from the audience and FE Week.

Here are the key takeaways:

1 'I don't want us to forget the young'

Apprenticeship starts among young people have been steadily decreasing since the government's levy reforms in 2017.

In 2018/19, under 19s made up 24.8 per cent of all starts, this dropped to 23.6 per cent in 2019/20 and in 2020/21 it fell to 20.3 per cent.

It's an issue the skills minister has identified and has promised to tackle – starting with a letter to school leavers.

He told conference: "I don't want us to forget the young because there is something unquestionably special about the school leaver setting out to learn their craft."

"The economy is hungry for skills. We know that the young are hungry for apprenticeships."

"I want more young people to know about these options and these opportunities. And that's why in National Apprenticeship Week, back in February, I wrote to all year 11, year 12 and year 13 pupils in schools and their parents to tell them about the great opportunities offered by apprenticeships."

2 Plans to tackle 'burdensome' system for SMEs

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

Small employers fully transitioned onto the service in April 2021, meaning that all apprenticeship starts must now go through the system rather than procured non-levy contracts held by training providers.



Burghart said this has been a "time of significant change" and recognised there are concerns that this "new way of working" has introduced some "additional administration, which has been burdensome for providers, and for particularly for SMEs".

"I want to reassure you all that in the department we've heard and that we're starting in depth discussions with providing groups over the coming months to fully understand the impact and to identify areas where we can make improvements to our systems," he told delegates.

"And I've asked my officials to bring people together to have a series of hackathons on the system, make sure that we can make it as effective as it can be. To make sure that we reduce as much friction as possible so that we can encourage more SMEs to get involved."

3 No extension to employer cash incentives

Burghart used his speech to hail the sector's efforts in recovering apprenticeship start numbers to pre-pandemic levels.

One audience member told the minister he believed this was largely to do with the £3,000 employer cash incentives that were introduced in 2020 but end this month.

Burghart said it is "really good to hear the incentives were well received" but admitted there are no plans to reintroduce them.

He later told FE Week: "The chancellor has made clear that the incentive was a Covid recovery measure. As a government, we can't

afford to keep furlough going, we couldn't afford to keep a whole host of other support packages in place and we shouldn't because the pandemic is over and we have to get back to normal.

"I understand the incentive was great, it was effective, but it was there to solve a problem at a moment in time. We're learning to live with Covid now."

4 Are apprentices paid enough?

Apprentice pay is "better than it looks on paper", the skills minister insisted.

FE Week quizzed Burghart on the issue in the face of a cost-of-living crisis.

Experts, including the Low Pay Commission, recognise that many deem the minimum wage for apprentices to be "unfair" and a disincentive for those considering the programme.

The minimum rate currently stands at £4.30 an hour but will increase to £4.81 an hour next month.

Burghart said he "knows it is a difficult time" but asked people "to bear in mind a few points" which show apprentice pay isn't as bad as some fear.

"I completely appreciate that this is a very increasingly difficult time for a lot of people across the country with increasing inflation and increasing cost of living, particularly energy costs. I know that everyone is starting to feel the squeeze," he told FE Week.

"But remember that this wage is a minimum, and most apprentices will be earning more than that."

The skills minister added that he thinks the median income for apprentices is actually closer to about £8.24 an hour.

Burghart said: "Whilst that's still difficult for some people, it [apprentice pay] is better than it looks on paper."

5 'We need you'

Burghart finished his speech by saying this is an "extremely exciting time to be in technical education" before making a rallying call to the sector.

"It's the reforms that we've been working on, the government has been working on for the better part of a decade, and starting to gather pace and make a real difference to learners and employers to make this a success."

"We need you here to continue working with us and championing high quality apprenticeships."

DfE 'will not be satisfied' with upcoming apprenticeship achievement rates

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The government's top apprenticeships civil servant hinted there will be a big drop in national achievement rates this year.

Peter Mucklow told day one of the conference that both the revised apprenticeship achievement rates for 2019/20 and the new rates for 2020/21 will be published imminently.

But he warned his department "will not be satisfied with those levels" when they are released.

Without revealing what the rates are expected to look like, Mucklow, the Department for Education's director of apprenticeships, said: "We need to get those achievement rates up."

"Now I know there are good outcomes for people who leave apprenticeships without achieving their qualification. Nonetheless, achievement rates are already around the lower levels and that is something we cannot be satisfied with."

Low achievement rates will have been impacted by Covid-19 but are also largely to blame for retention rates.

National achievement rate tables published last year showed that the overall rate for all apprenticeships fell slightly from 64.8 per cent in 2018/19 to 64.2 per cent in 2019/20.

But the retention rate for standards in 2018/19 was 48.3 per cent and in 2019/20 was 60.2 per cent. Former skills minister Gillian Keegan ordered an investigation into the "astonishingly" high drop-out rate last year.

The DfE was forced to remove last year's published achievement rates in February due to an "error".

Mucklow revealed at AAC that error came about because he took his "best people" off the job owing to Covid.

"During the Covid period in terms of the quality assessment of data, there was an error. The reason for that error was because we put some of our best people who do the quality assessment and assurance year on year on other work in the department," he said.

"We thought that was the right thing but



Peter Mucklow

we've since discovered that in the 2019/20 published data was incorrect. There was an error that was made. Obviously, that's quite a serious thing. So as soon as we found that out we put that into the public domain."

Asked whether he was confident this error would never happen again, Mucklow said "yes".

"We're very satisfied this will not happen again because we are putting the strongest possible quality assurance team to ensure that it doesn't."

Low apprenticeship achievement rates will not impact Ofsted grades

Training providers will not be dealt low Ofsted grades just because their achievement rates have declined, the chief inspector promised.

Amanda Spielman told the conference that the watchdog's new inspection framework "does not require inspectors to use achievement rates to make a judgement".

Her assurance came hours after the government's director of apprenticeships, Peter Mucklow, warned the sector that officials "will not be satisfied" with the level of apprenticeship achievement rates when they are published in the coming days.

Spielman said she was aware that the pandemic has caused more apprentices than usual to go beyond their planned end date



Amanda Spielman

or even out of funding.

"It's understandable that many of you are concerned about the impact of this on your achievement rates and how this might affect inspection judgements," she told delegates.

"Achievement rates are important. Apprentices want to pass their qualification as it is often a passport to their next steps – and that's a good thing. But please be assured, the framework does not require inspectors to use achievement rates to make judgement."

The chief inspector continued: "We will not be making judgements of 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' just because your achievement rates have declined during the pandemic."

"What we will want to hear about, and see evidence of, is how your teams of mentors, coaches and trainers are working with

apprentices and employers to reorganise training. It's this that will keep current apprentices making good progress, and get the apprentices who are past their planned end date, or out of funding, through their end point assessment.

"It could mean additional or refresher training, or some reorganisation of responsibilities at work. The outcome that we will be looking for is apprentices who have the skills and knowledge to achieve their qualification."

Apprenticeship achievement rates have not been published at institution level for the past two years owing to the pandemic and will not return until 2021/22.

However, while provider-level achievement rates will not be published this year, they will still be shared with providers and Ofsted privately.

AAC 2022 pre-event survey: The results

SHANE CHOWEN SHANE.CHOWEN@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Over 200 FE Week readers have had their say on a range of apprenticeship policy issues. We launched a short survey ahead of this year's AAC to see what our readers thought about some of the big issues facing apprenticeships.

Here's what they had to say:

The apprenticeship levy payment rates don't need to change

Since the apprenticeship levy was introduced, the amount an eligible employer has had to pay has been calculated at 0.5 per cent of their annual pay bill.

The vast majority, 70 per cent, of survey respondents said that this level of repayment should continue.

Around two-in-five respondents said that the 0.5 per cent rate should be increased and just 19 per cent believed that the rate should be reduced.



● **Keep at 0.5%: 70%**
● **Increase the levy %: 19%**
● **Decrease the levy %: 11%**

Only employers with an annual pay bill of more than £3 million are required to pay the apprenticeship levy.

Scrapping the £3 million threshold so all employers would be in scope of paying the levy was supported by 39 per cent of survey respondents. Just four per cent supported raising the threshold.

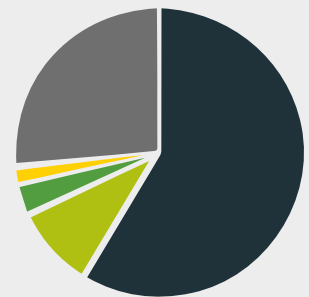
The majority view was that the £3 million threshold should stay the same.

Employers should continue to co-invest at the same rate

Employers that don't pay the apprenticeship levy contribute 5 per cent of the cost of training.

For 59 per cent of FE Week readers that took part in our survey, that co-funding rate should stay the same.

Just over a quarter however, 27 per cent, said that this should be reduced to zero.



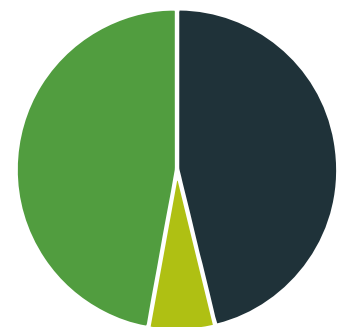
● **Keep the same: 59%**
● **Increase to 10%: 10%**
● **Increase to 20%: 3%**
● **Increase to 50%: 2%**
● **Reduce to 0%: 27%**

Sector split on reducing off-the-job training minimum

Respondents to our survey said that the 20 per cent off-the-job training rule should be decreased ... but only by a very slim majority.

The controversial training policy has been criticised by employers and training providers but is defended by the government as a way of protecting quality.

While 47 per cent said that the 20 per cent rule should be reduced, 46 per cent said it should be kept the same.



● **Keep the minimum at 20%: 46%**
● **Increase the minimum %: 7%**
● **Decrease the minimum %: 47%**



CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

The top issues facing apprenticeship providers

To close our survey, we gave FE Week readers the chance to tell us what the single biggest issue was that they are facing around apprenticeship delivery.

Here are the top five issues with comments from our survey:

1. Bureaucracy

"Complex funding rules require huge amount of resources to administer and manage. EPA resourcing is complex in construction and engineering.

Plus costs have increased and it's getting more difficult to find spare staffing capacity."

"There is far too much bureaucracy; there is the levy, evidence 20 per cent off the job, co-funding paperwork, incentives admin – this list goes on. The costs and audit risk are getting to the point that the product of apprenticeships, which is outstanding in developing skills and getting people into work is become unviable to deliver."

"Complex and time-consuming bureaucracy deters SME and micro-businesses from participating. That's not a major problem for large entities, often with their own HR departments and even apprenticeship managers. For SME, it can be a deal-breaker in the cost-benefit equation."

"The fact that only 1 per cent of employers currently employ an apprentice, at a time of record skill shortages this is a major issue – reduce the red tape to grow the numbers."



2. Funding

"Funding bands not covering the true cost of apprenticeship delivery and functional skills being under-funded and not part of off-the-job."

"Funding rates are too low to preserve the delivery required and EPA rates are far too high. Basically the apprenticeships programme will collapse under the burden of low funding rates and very high quality and compliance demands."

"Insufficient funding and not keeping up to date with cost of living and delivery. The shortage of funding for apprenticeships makes it difficult to recruit new staff from the sector. Often there is a £10,000 gap between sector and education pay."



"It is becoming too costly to deliver the standards in some apprenticeships, especially customer service, business admin, team leader and level operational management."

3. Working with employers

"We're finding there's a lack of employers taking on new apprentices. The £3,000 incentive was a big help."

"The lack of level 2 apprenticeships and the huge increase in higher level apprenticeships is squeezing out opportunities for young people."

"Some employers in the engineering sector still have perceptions that apprenticeships are not as valid as degrees."

"Employers unable to find a suitable provider to deliver the apprenticeship they need. The challenges of the economy, particularly for smaller employers, is making this worse in my area."

4. Off-the-job training

"Many employers are facing staff shortages and additional staff sickness which has resulted in additional pressure on business's meaning time out on apprenticeships is becoming more challenging than ever."

"The 20 per cent off-the-job rule is very hard for employers to support. As a large employer we can't spend all of our levy because we can't afford to allow the amount of staff to have the time out. This therefore reduces the amount of apprenticeships we can offer."

"The 20 per cent rule needs reviewing. There are lots of other things that have to be delivered as part of apprenticeships now; including functional skills, prevent, sexual consent and abuse, safeguarding etc which doesn't count. It makes no sense."

"Learners getting time at work for off the job activities. May be an idea to change the terminology from 'off the job' to 'apprenticeship activities' or something similar."

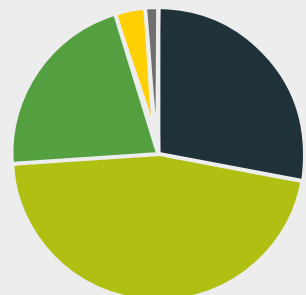
5. The digital apprenticeship service

"Getting non-levy employers on the DAS has been a huge sap on our resources and has angered a lot of employers. The bureaucracy

Ending the apprenticeship incentive payments will reduce apprentice starts

Three-quarters of FE Week survey respondents believe that the government's decision to stop the £3,000 apprenticeship incentive payments for employers will reduce starts.

Of them, 62 per cent believed that starts will be reduced slightly and 38 per cent said starts will be reduced dramatically.



- Reduce dramatically: 28%
- Reduce slightly: 46%
- No change: 21%
- Increase slightly: 3%
- Increase dramatically: 1%

involved in registering, reserving finding and applying for incentives has been horrendous for a lot of small businesses, with a number missing out on incentives by missing deadlines and then blaming the training provider."

"Use of digital accounts for SMEs is overly bureaucratic and is creating administration issues and delaying starts. It puts employers off."

"The digital apprenticeship service is an administrative burden costing us in time and increasing frustration. It is not working for SMEs or us."



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HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE AAC MAIN STAGE KEYNOTES

BILLY CAMDEN, WILL NOTT, SHANE CHOWEN | NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Hay's three themes as new chair of AELP

Nichola Hay, the new chair of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, outlined three themes that will set the agenda for her leadership.

She presented three messages during her speech, the first of which was that the sector urgently needs a skills system which is accessible to all "no matter what age or level" and which "moved away from an outdated, institution-led approach."

"Our message is loud and clear, a demand led system must have a level playing field. ITPs have a key role, this must be recognised."

Hay said ITPs are responsible for delivering seven out of ten apprenticeships nationally as well as study programmes, traineeships, adult education and a range of programmes for the unemployed.

"Why wouldn't government talk to us about apprenticeship policy if we deliver the lion

share, we must be the experts, mustn't we?" she said.

Hay's second message related to inflation, something she called the "elephant in the room".

She called on the government to talk to ITPs and address what she called the "real, current issue of inflation and cost pressures for all FE".

Hay warned of challenges around attracting and retaining delivery staff – "the real risk is that quality will ultimately suffer," she said.

In her final message, Hay said she wanted to ensure that providers recognise the "shifting sands on devolution" and commissioning opportunities.

She said the ESFA are now "not the only commissioners and paymasters in town".

Hay explained that apprenticeships have been devolved to employers and opportunities for adult skills funding are being procured



Nichola Hay

locally, with LSIPs in transit, to meet help local and regional needs.

"ITPs have been very successful in the procurement rounds due to our ability to adapt and respond quickly, so don't be afraid of the sea change and continue to grasp the opportunity," she added.

The levy needs tweaks, not wholesale reform, says AoC's David Hughes

In his keynote speech on day two of AAC, the chief executive of the Association of Colleges, David Hughes, gave his take on whether the levy is living up to the government's ambitions when it was introduced.

"Do you remember the three million target?" Hughes asks the conference hall as he recounts the 2015 budget where then chancellor George Osborne announced that employers over a certain size will be asked to pay a new apprenticeship levy.

In the years since, that target has been quietly dropped. But that's not all that's changed in the skills system over the years.

"They were very clear at the time" he said "that the apprenticeships programme was the cornerstone of the skills system."

The priority now given to T Levels, and the more recent announcements around higher technical qualifications, were two examples that have taken the spotlight away from apprenticeships in recent years.

None of that detracts from Hughes' central message – that "it's time for the



David Hughes

government to do a proper open review [of the levy] to find out whether it has achieved what it set out to."

Hughes recounted lines from the levy consultation document, questioning their currency as the levy is about to mark its five year milestone; Increasing employer investment ("I don't think that's happened universally") and a simplified system (amongst an audible laugh from conference floor, Hughes adds "if you ask SMEs if the digital service is keeping things simple ... they probably wouldn't agree with that.")

He ended his keynote with some advice for the Treasury. "There are six things that need to be reviewed" when it comes to the levy; be clear what it's for, improve transparency, clarify how apprenticeships fit with the rest of the education system, more place-based collaboration, reduce bureaucracy and, finally, address shortfalls in funding.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE AAC MAIN STAGE KEYNOTES

Labour: The skills bill is a 'missed opportunity'



Toby Perkins MP

The government's skills bill is a "missed opportunity", according to Toby Perkins.

Labour's shadow skills minister told AAC the bill has "disappointingly" been stripped of cross-party amendments in the House of Lords and Commons that offered "real hope".

He said what remains is a bill with "nothing to say on apprenticeships, is weak on careers guidance and appears to not recognise the vital role that independent providers can play".

One of the bill's new policies is the creation of local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) led by employer representative bodies, which will aim to make colleges and providers align the courses they offer to local employers' needs.

Perkins warned of the troubles this reform could lead to.

"We are all used to Tory governments outsourcing services, but it is unusual to have a government that outsources policy. Yet the introduction of LSIPs sitting in the hands of chambers of commerce is precisely that," he said.

"As you will be aware, employer representative bodies will now be the local pen holders on skills policy and I fear that the wide spectrum of opportunities and providers, the technological advancements that have changed skill provision and the barriers that exist to prevent some learners accessing the workplace could all be casualties of this approach."

IfATE chief: 'It's time to reset, learn from adversity, and move forward together'

Jennifer Coupland made a rallying call to the sector to "reset and learn from adversity" as we move on from the pandemic.

The Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education chief said the sector must now get to grips with the pre-pandemic challenges that have "dogged the skills space for decades".

She reminded delegates that individualised learner accounts, Train 2 Gain, and the old framework apprenticeships all "suffered" for different reasons from the same problem – that people were not getting enough high-quality training.

Coupland said the country is "nowhere near" the challenges faced by past programmes, but there are still issues that need to be addressed.

"We still have a third of apprentices saying they're not getting their full quota of off the job training," she said.



Jennifer Coupland

"The completion rate for apprenticeships last year was also still only around 65 per cent – which isn't good enough.

"We need to take those commitment statements signed by the employer, apprentice and provider and really honour them.

"We also need to do more to support young apprentices to stick out their apprenticeship by demonstrating the value of training they are getting and mentoring them through life events that might tip over into a decision to drop out."

Coupland also used her speech to plug the IfATE's new funding model for apprenticeships, which is currently being piloted.

"This will better reflect the true costs of delivery and support more quality training in the years to come," she said.

She concluded: "It's time to reset, learn from adversity, and move forward together."

Tim Campbell calls for a redefined apprenticeships brand

The Apprentice star Tim Campbell called on the sector to redefine the brand strength of apprenticeships during a keynote speech on day two of AAC.

Campbell, an entrepreneur who won the first series of the BBC show in 2005 and is now Lord Sugar's righthand man on the programme, spoke passionately about the role apprenticeships can play in transforming people's lives.

But he said the government has so far got it wrong on increasing the prestige of apprenticeships and implored the sector's training providers and employers to take on this task themselves.

He asked the audience: "If I say to you 'every little helps' what would you think? Tesco. If I was to say to you 'simples' what would you think? Meerkats, insurance.

"For many people, when you talk about apprenticeships,

we are seeing it as second tier. The branding that we have around apprenticeships has to change."

Campbell continued: "Our politicians need to get much clearer about what are they advocating. Are we talking about bridging the skills gap, trying to mitigate the productivity issue or are they talking about finding a placement for the people who can't get into work?"

The TV star called for "clarity" and pressed: "We shouldn't be waiting for government to dictate the message, we should be dictating what the brand for apprenticeships looks like. You know the success stories."

"I think what we have with regards to apprenticeships compared to a degree is as high value but the branding around it is not as clear. I think that is wrong because the work you do is transformational."



Tim Campbell

2022 FE WEEK & AELP AAC APPRENTICESHIP AWARDS



Stronger than ever: recognition for this year's finalists and winners at the AAC awards

**WILL NOTT
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The winners of the 2022 Annual Apprenticeship Conference Awards have been revealed at a glitzy ceremony in Birmingham.

From a record-breaking 370 awards entries, judges have selected 24 award winners and 12 highly commended recipients. Categories included awards for diversity, SEND, campaigns that promote apprenticeships, as well as 15 sector-specific awards.

Gower College Swansea scooped two awards, taking home care services apprenticeship provider of the year and the SEND apprenticeship champion award.

Shane Mann, managing director of *FE Week's* publisher Lsect, and AAC awards co-host, said: "These awards have proved there is so much to celebrate in the apprenticeships sector.

"The providers, employers and individuals we've recognised tonight represent the innovators, risk-takers and pioneers that are not only doing amazing things for apprentices, but are also proving that apprenticeships are a first-rate pathway through education.

"Congratulations to all the winners and thanks to our team of amazing judges, sponsors and partners. We couldn't have done it without them."

The evening culminated in the award for apprentice employer of the year, won by Lloyds Banking Group, and apprentice provider of the year, won by Realise.

"We are absolutely thrilled to be recognised with this award in what is our tenth year of delivering apprenticeships within Lloyds Banking Group," a spokesperson for Lloyds said.

"The award is great recognition for the apprenticeship team and all the business leads and line managers who drive and support the delivery of the programmes,



as well as the amazing apprentices who embrace the opportunities to develop new skills."

The spokesperson said that Lloyds Banking Group is proud of its hard work and would like to dedicate the award to all of them.

Realise told *FE Week* that the secret to its success was investing in people, to help them deliver the best training they can.

"It's absolutely brilliant to win the award, and it is just testament to all the people at Realise on how hard they have worked to achieve this," a spokesperson said.

Co-hosting the awards ceremony was

AELP chief executive Jane Hickie.

"The AAC apprenticeship awards are a highlight of the conference every year – and it's great that AELP and *FE Week* have been able to work together to put this event on once again," she said.

"I would like to send congratulations to all the finalists but especially to the winners. The last 12 months have been tough for many apprenticeship providers as we have come out of the pandemic, so it's even more remarkable that the entrants were so strong this year."

**SEE THE FULL LIST OF AWARDS
WINNERS ON THE NEXT PAGE**

2022 FE WEEK & AELP AAC APPRENTICESHIP AWARDS

Full list of the 2022 winners
and highly commended

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Agriculture, Environmental & Animal
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Myerscough College

Business & Administration
Apprenticeship provider of the year

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Lifetime Training

HIGHLY COMMENDED
Wakefield CollegeCare Services Apprenticeship
provider of the year

Sponsored by Pearson

Gower College Swansea

Catering & Hospitality Apprenticeship
provider of the yearBournemouth and
Poole CollegeConstruction Apprenticeship
provider of the year

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The SMB College Group/
Barratt Developments PLCCreative & Design Apprenticeship
provider of the year

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provider of the year

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MBKB Training

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provider of the year

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AWARDINGSeetec Outsource Training
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SEND Apprenticeship Champion Award

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Gower College Swansea

HIGHLY COMMENDED
Salford City College

Apprenticeship Diversity Award

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Great Ormond Street NHS

HIGHLY COMMENDED
DaviesPromoting Apprenticeships
campaign of the yearSponsored by CAREERS &
ENTERPRISE
COMPANY

Big Assembly by Workpays

HIGHLY COMMENDED
Apprenticeships NorfolkOutstanding contribution to the development
of apprenticeships (Employer, provider
and individual)

EMPLOYER

Sponsored by City & Guilds | ilm

Travis Perkins Plc

HIGHLY COMMENDED
Iceland Foods

INDIVIDUAL

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Ian Bamford
(Chief Operating Officer,
Paragon Skills)HIGHLY COMMENDED
Amy Smith
(Head Of Talent,
Framestore
(Visual Effects))

PROVIDER

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Iceland Foods

Apprenticeship Provider of the year

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Realise



Ask the inspectors

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If you could ask an Ofsted inspector anything, what would you ask?

Delegates had the opportunity to put their burning questions directly to two experienced Ofsted inspectors during breakout sessions at this year's AAC.

Bravely facing attendees was Julie Ashton, senior HMI for further education and skills in the East Midlands regional team, and Richard Pemble, Ofsted's further education and skills specialist adviser.

Here are some of the highlights:

Consistency with the ESFA accountability framework

One delegate was keen to understand how consistent Ofsted will be in their findings during inspections with the ESFA's apprenticeships accountability framework. For example, the questioner asked, "if the ESFA are saying a 15 per cent passed planned end date is within acceptable parameters, is there some assurance that we won't receive a different message [from Ofsted]?"

Ashton was first to respond, outlining initially that Ofsted are still developing their policy position in relation to the accountability framework.

She added, "As an HMI inspecting, my position would be to ask why they aren't finishing in the time that you planned. You will have really good reasons as to why and you will be able to share that quite sensibly with us. It's up to you to tell that story."

Feedback from inspections of levels six and seven apprenticeships

University delegates were keen to get some insight from inspectors on the good points, bad points and areas to improve they were seeing from their work looking at the quality of apprenticeships at levels six and seven.

"The bottom line is," Pemble began, "it's an apprenticeship. The strengths we see in apprenticeship provision at every other level are mirrored at levels six and seven. As are the weaknesses. It's a very consistent picture."

Providing further detail, Pemble added, "you know what makes a good apprenticeship; its that good IAG getting them on the right programme, excellent training, good employer engagement, end point assessment and that seamless journey that's well organised and well communicated."

Accommodating impacts of the pandemic

A delegate from a training provider specialising in health and healthcare related apprenticeships began their question by explaining how the sector had been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and how the demands of their jobs has meant that apprentices have fallen behind in their learning, dropped out of their apprenticeship or left the sector altogether. "Will Ofsted be taking into account that the data will be slightly dirtier than perhaps it would be in other years?"

Ashton described how a "sensible dialogue" might go between inspectors and provider

leaders during inspections where the pandemic appears to have had a negative impact on provider performance.

"What we're really interested in is what you've done about it and how you're mitigating against any of those issues" Ashton said.

Providers shouldn't be complacent, however.

Ashton added: "I'm afraid we have come across some providers that haven't done right by their apprentices, ie they've not been in touch with them for six months, sometimes longer. But if you can tell us a story that makes absolute sense, then we're generally all ears."

Pemble replied saying "we understand that through Covid some industries haven't been able to operate, so timescales have extended. Where is the evidence of the discussion with the employer and the apprentice to agree their new end date and agree what their new training plan is? And where's the evidence that it's working?"

Is the inspection framework still fit for purpose?

A college delegate wanted to know whether the experience of the pandemic, particularly the move to much more remote and hybrid teaching and learning, might trigger changes to the education inspection framework.

A resolute "no" from Pemble. "The framework is the framework and its adaptable to a whole series of circumstances."

Including, seemingly, a massive global pandemic.

"Inspecting remote learning isn't anything new to us" he concluded.

DfE: Off-the-job 'gives us the worst nightmare' during audits

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Evidencing off-the-job training is the area that trips up apprenticeship providers the most when it comes to audits, according to a Department for Education official.

Helen Boon, the DfE's post-16 assurance manager, told AAC delegates the policy "gives us the worst nightmare ever" as it forces her team to clawback funds on a regular basis.

The rule, which requires apprentices to spend a fifth of their week on activities related to their course that are different to their normal working duties, was introduced in 2015.

Boon said: "We look to see that you've calculated it correctly but the amount of times we find that's not being done right...we don't see how it's being planned. We don't see how it's being delivered."

"If we haven't got the evidence then we will say your apprenticeship is ineligible and we'll ask you for that money back."



"I think the perception is out there, from what we gather, that we won't clawback but we do clawback. There have been providers who have been a victim of that."

Boon added: "We do try everything we can. We say 'go away and find some alternative evidence, we want you to show us that you've done the 20 per cent, please'. But unfortunately, it's not always possible and they haven't got the records and then we have to say right we're going to take all that funding back."

"So I cannot stress enough how important it is that you have your records, of the off-the-job."

Other common "errors" the DfE finds during audit include lack of evidence of the start of an apprentice's training and their general participation; the 12-month minimum duration not being met; payment of small employer contributions; and recognition of prior attainment in English and maths.

Boon also warned delegates that her

department is seeing an increase in providers claiming support for learners who "do not meet the criteria" as having a learning disability or difficulty.

She said there is also a lack of evidence that a SEND assessment has taken place to identify the support required and a lack of evidence of support being delivered to the learner.

Lastly, Boon reminded the audience that with all subcontracting, there must be evidence of delivery related to the apprenticeship by the prime provider.

She said the DfE is looking for "substance" in this area. She admitted that "substance" is not defined in the funding rules, but her department is "looking to improve the wording on that".

She added: "Even so, we wouldn't expect it just to be a token amount of something very small, a couple of little bits you're doing at the beginning maybe. We would expect to see something a bit more than that."



‘Green skills are for everyone’: how the green agenda is shaping FE

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Exploring how sustainability is becoming an increasingly important part of a quality education and what steps FE providers can take to enhance their green provision was discussed at the Annual Apprenticeship Conference.

Charlotte Bonner, national head of education for sustainable development at the Education and Training Foundation spoke alongside Alex Miles, managing director at West and North Yorkshire Learning Providers to a packed room on day one.

“The point of it is that green skills are for everyone”

While sustainability has become the “zeitgeist” in FE and training, Miles explained to delegates that providers aren’t always aware of the steps they can take because they work in sectors that don’t centre on sustainability.

“When I go around and talk to training providers some of the kickback I get is, well, we don’t offer green apprenticeships or we don’t work in a green sector or our jobs are green,” she said.

“The point of it is that green skills are for everyone. It isn’t just for those that are in a certain sector and isn’t a certain demographic who are just being taught sustainability skills or



Alex Miles, managing director at West and North Yorkshire Learning Providers

net zero, or climate change skills.”

The importance of sustainability hasn’t been lost on those who regulate the sector – Miles noted that as educators, and for those who have to adhere to Ofsted, you are preparing learners for life in modern Britain.

“That is what you’re judged against. That’s what you’re inspected against. That’s what our curriculum development and our curriculum plans should be doing.

“And you can’t talk to people about life in modern Britain without talking about the skills to be made wiser and make more educated choices in terms of climate change and net zero,” she said.

Bonner told the

audience that the policy landscape in the UK is changing very rapidly, and that in the last year and a half there has been more sustainability related strategies that have come out of government in the last 12 years.

“Within the net zero strategy, there’s a section on skills and learning within the industrial template 10 Point Plan for green industrial revolution.



Providers need to get on board with 'hybrid learning' or face missing out

Very Expertise and Flexibility

Apprenticeship Standard	Duration (months)	Online Lessons	On Campus Workshops	Start Dates	Totals Points
Finance Assistant (L2)	12-14	Weekly	Fortnightly	September, January, April	N/A
Accountant (L3)	15-16	Weekly	Fortnightly	September, January, April	N/A
Accounting / Taxation (L4)	18-24	Weekly	Weekly/Fortnightly	September, January, April	N/A
Business Administration (L2)	18-24	Weekly	Fortnightly	September, January, April	N/A
Business Supervisor (L3)	12-15	Weekly	Monthly/Bi-Monthly	September, January, April	Bi-Monthly
Departmental Manager (L5)	24-30	Weekly	Monthly/Bi-Monthly	September, January, April	Bi-Monthly
HR Business Partner (L5)	15-18	Weekly	Fortnightly	September, January, April	Bi-Monthly
HR Partner (L5)	24-30	Weekly	Fortnightly	September, January, April	Bi-Monthly



Mark McKenna, Managing Director of Mindful Education

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Hybrid learning is the “new normal” and providers could miss out on opportunities if they don’t offer flexibility, delegates heard during a breakout session at AAC.

The talk was led by Mark McKenna, managing director of Mindful Education, a company that creates “new and innovative” courses to meet the needs of learners, providers and employers.

He spoke about how before the pandemic there was a reticence from employers who thought they might get “short changed” by a hybrid approach, or that they were part of “some sort of experiment” by the training providers.

However, McKenna explained that over the last two years, employers have started to understand what hybrid really means.

“A lot of work can be done flexibly, people with children really value hybrid

working..., taking that away from people is incredibly difficult,” he said.

He also noted that government guidance has changed in favour of more flexible approaches around off-the-job training offers – something he called “a real step change”.

Now, according to McKenna, people are looking at how the apprenticeship levy might be used to offer more flexibility for apprentices.

“Obviously after the pandemic people have built up levy which they want to use... and they’ve embraced different ways to use that so they’re not just going to look to do face-to-face,” McKenna said.

Delegates heard how employers are increasingly asking for flexible delivery around tenders and procurement. McKenna explained that now even traditional institutions are mandating a blended learning approach.

The necessity of flexibility was echoed by Kirsty Marsh-Hyde, national

programme manager for apprenticeships at Health Education England.

“In our team, we do a lot of big procurements that are about driving quality across the country,” said Marsh-Hyde.

“And an integral part of those procurements now is flexibility. I’ve been on panels where we have rejected them because there hasn’t been flexibility.”

Marsh-Hyde said that in the specifications for the procurement she works on, those applying need to show how they can be flexible and be open.

“It has a real direct impact on workforce numbers. We’re talking about whether people can get onto an apprenticeship and do their job, and run their family or not... and if they can’t study online, or if there are different start times of the year, then they just won’t be on that apprenticeship. So that’s a big issue,” she added.

As the demand for a flexible approach increases, McKenna argued more work needs to be done by providers to improve their understanding of blended and hybrid learning.

“There’s been a huge emphasis on how training providers move across to this new way. But I don’t feel like there’s been a huge amount of time and money investment in truly understanding how you do that,” he said.

He added that because this shift has happened, organisations will have to invest in new products, new solutions and new ways of doing things: “That comes with time, money, risk, difficulty as well.

“I don’t think it’s really talked about enough in the sector.... But if we’re going to meet that new demand it has to be invested in.”

Youth views on apprenticeships

SHANE CHOWEN

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Creating and improving apprenticeship opportunities for young people was a key theme at this year's AAC. Everyone with a view on improving the system, including the minister for skills Alex Burghart himself, made some reference to the pressing need to reverse the decline in the numbers of apprenticeship opportunities available to young people.

Yet all too often, it's the voices of young people themselves that is missing from these discussions.

Enter Laura-Jane Rawlings, chief executive of Youth Employment UK; a social enterprise founded ten years ago to tackle youth unemployment.

"The biggest piece of research we do each year is called the youth voice census" Rawlings explains at the start of the session.

Far from being the biggest piece of research for YEUK, this may well be the largest youth-led evidence base of young people's insight around work, education and training in the country. The 2021 census received over 3,400 responses from 14-24 year olds across the UK.

The full report, available on YEUK's website, analyses responses to around 200 questions with detailed reports broken down by age, education setting and by often unreported characteristics such as experience of the criminal justice system and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

YEUK's AAC breakout was a deep-dive look at young people's experience of apprenticeships.

Careers advice in schools isn't the problem

The breadth and impartiality of careers information in schools is often painted as one of the main reasons young people aren't participating in apprenticeship. But Rawlings provides a counter-narrative using evidence from the youth voice census.

"Our data shows that 85 per cent of young people are hearing about apprenticeships in schools. It's not perfect," Rawlings told a

packed breakout room, "but I don't think that's where the whole problem lies."

"What we're actually hearing from young people is despite hearing more about apprenticeships, only 28.6 per cent are likely to go on and apply for an apprenticeship. We have to understand what's holding young people back."

Who wants to go and work in a boring job?

So what's going wrong? Take the job descriptions that are advertised for example.

"We've got young people with very little experience with the world of work because of Covid, so we really have to think about the way we're advertising and communicating opportunity to them to make it feel safe and trusted and exciting. Who wants to go and work in a boring job?"

Employers should road test their job descriptions and recruitment processes with young people, Rawlings advised, so they can spot the jargon and tell you how to make them more youth friendly.

Support from training providers could be better

Data from the census showed that just 55.6 per cent rated the support they receive from their training provider as good or excellent.

The census survey was carried out during the Covid period, Rawlings explains,

and it finds that the level and quality of support provided was not consistent for all young people.

During that time, YEUK had two apprentices with two different providers and explains the support on offer was "mediocre if not poor."

"There was no mental health support, no one to one calls, inconsistent communication with the apprentices and very little communication with us as an employer. There are a lot of young people out there who were not being communicated with and who didn't feel supported by their training provider."

Pay matters

Only 54.7 per cent of apprentices rated their salary as good or better, and that was before the cost of living crisis apprentices today will be living through.

Rawlings challenged delegates to consider what's being done to address this.

"How many of us are putting our apprenticeship rates up and how many of us paying our apprentices a living wage?"

"There are young people that simply can't afford to do an apprenticeship. They can't afford the travel, the lunch money, the suit or applicable dress code expected of them."

Youth Employment UK's youth voice census for 2022 opens on March 31 and is open to all 11-30 year-olds. Details on how to promote and participate can be found on YEUK's website.



Laura-Jane Rawlings



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