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FEWEEK

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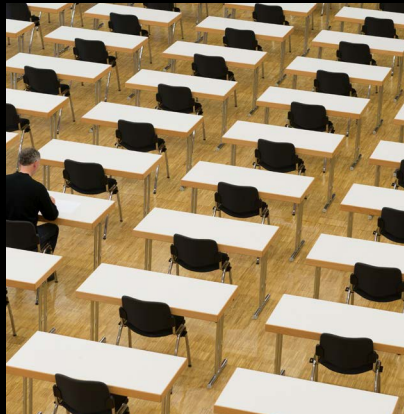
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PART TWO

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PART THREE

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PART FOUR

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ESFA probe into ex-principal's huge salary

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EXCLUSIVE

Fraud investigators have exposed “funding irregularities” involving payments to England’s former highest paid principal Sir Paul Phillips, *FE Week* can reveal.

The government has intervened and longstanding chair Andrew Leighton-Price has stepped aside at Weston College, where Phillips worked for over 20 years and employed his son as chief financial officer.

Tim Jackson, an adviser to the FE Commissioner and former principal of Sparsholt College, has been parachuted in to lead the college’s governing board while investigations continue.

Weston College is yet to publish accounts for 2022/23 but previous financial statements show Phillips was paid £357,000 and £362,000 in 2021 and 2022 respectively.

Paid 9.6 times median wage

The government’s probe follows revelations in *FE Week* that Phillips earned a basic salary of 9.6 times more than the median pay of his full-time staff in 2022 – the highest pay multiple across the college sector. He was set to take on a unique remunerated role of “president” after he retired but governors U-turned on the controversial plan after it thwarted the college’s recruitment process for a successor.

Interim principal Jacqui Ford told staff on Wednesday the Education and Skills Funding Agency’s counter fraud and investigation team, through auditor BDO, had “uncovered some historical failures of financial management and controls, and failure to disclose certain financial information”.

Weston College is now braced for a financial notice to improve (NTI) which will say: “The investigation has found failures of management and controls, including high remuneration packages to the retired ex-principal, and failure



Sir Paul Phillips

to disclose such details of senior pay as required through the ESFA’s college accounts direction.”

The college nor the government commented on the full nature of the financial irregularities at the time of going to press.

Staff are “not massively surprised” about the intervention, according to *FE Week* sources.

Phillips was appointed as one of the government’s national leaders of further education in 2017 and knighted for services to further education in 2022. Weston College was awarded the Association of Colleges award for excellence in governance last year.

Phillips retired from his principal role in August 2023. His departure was highly commemorated by the college, which organised a donation page for a holiday for Phillips and his wife, and a staff lunch that was set to show a video of staff lip-syncing Tina Turner’s *Simply the Best*, tailored to Phillips’ tenure at the college.

His son Joe Phillips joined the college in 2010 and has held posts including vice-principal for finance and business planning, deputy principal and most recently chief operating officer.

Joe Phillips resigned in late 2023.

Paul Phillips’ 2021 total pay packet included a basic salary of £222,000, “benefits in kind” of £28,000, a “deferred payment” from a “retention scheme” of £37,000, plus pension contributions of £70,000.

His basic salary shot up by 16 per cent to

£258,000 a year later. He also received £29,000 for benefits in kind and £75,000 pension contributions.

Phillips’ pay packet for 2023, his last year in post, is not yet known.

The government requires colleges to publish their accounts by January 31 each year. The counter fraud investigation is understood to be the reason why Weston College has delayed publishing its figures for this year.

‘No threat’ to college’s future

In a message to staff by interim principal Jacqui Ford, she made clear the intervention notice “focuses on the actions of staff no longer at the college” and does not threaten the college’s financial sustainability.

She added that the NTI will not impact day-to-day operations and was not a reflection of the quality of education at Weston College, which earlier this year was rated ‘good’ by Ofsted including for leadership and management.

“I have full confidence that we will quickly meet the requirements of the notice to improve and will restore the confidence of the ESFA,” Ford told staff.

Incoming chair Tim Jackson is expected to begin his role next month. He has already met with the board, staff and incoming permanent principal Pat Jones who is set to take the reins in July.

Ford told *FE Week*: “The college is cooperating with the Department for Education and the FE Commissioner’s team on the matters identified, and to implement the conditions set out in that notice within as short a period of time as possible.

“In the meantime, the college is continuing to operate normally in serving our students, communities and businesses and we’d like to thank our staff for their hard work and professionalism at this time.”

FE Week has attempted to contact Paul Phillips, Joe Phillips, Andrew Leighton-Price and the DfE for comment.

Election '24: Sunak starts skills policy showdown

SHANE CHOWEN
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Voters will go to the polls on Thursday, July 4, Rishi Sunak has announced, kickstarting a six-week campaign "for Britain to choose its future".

The prime minister's announcement comes amid mounting concerns over skills shortages in key sectors of the economy, declining apprenticeship training opportunities for young people and a growing pay gap between teachers in FE and schools.

Parliament is expected to be "prorogued" later today and will officially dissolve on Thursday next week, freeing up MPs to hit the campaign trail.

It also means civil servants and public bodies will be subject to pre-election rules from tomorrow, restricting them from doing anything that could have a bearing on the election. Existing ministers remain in post but are advised to "observe discretion" over announcing new or long-term plans.

There is no FE-specific legislation currently going through Parliament but the election could delay crucial announcements on school teacher pay, which the Association of Colleges is relying on to recommend a pay increase for college staff (see page 12).

Should Labour form a majority government, the party will quickly need to prepare a budget for 2025-26 and a spending review to fund expensive education policies such as free primary school breakfast clubs and recruiting 6,500 new school teachers.

Apprenticeship divisions

A clear dividing line between the two main parties exists on apprenticeship funding.

Sir Keir Starmer announced his intention



Rishi Sunak



Sir Keir Starmer

to make big changes to the apprenticeship levy in his 2022 Labour party conference speech and this is, so far, his flagship skills reform. Labour said the party would replace the apprenticeship levy with a "growth and skills" levy to allow employers to spend up to 50 per cent of their funds on non-apprenticeship training.

According to Labour, companies could draw down funding for modular courses in "priority subjects" including green skills and social care as well as pre-apprenticeship training.

The Conservatives have attacked Labour's plans, claiming apprenticeship numbers would half (see comment on page 24).

Calls for levy reform have been rife amid declining numbers of young people taking up apprenticeships. A CIPD report this week said the number of under 19s starting apprenticeships had fallen 41 per cent since the apprenticeship levy was introduced and pointed to a "collapse" in apprenticeships offered in small businesses. Over that time employers have instead offered apprenticeships to workers aged 25-plus in

higher-level, professional occupations.

Despite announcing additional spending plans for small business apprenticeships last year, Labour has consistently dodged questions about whether this will be introduced.

But despite prolonged criticism from training providers and businesses, Conservative ministers have rejected calls to reform the levy since it was introduced in 2017.

Labour has also criticised high numbers of apprenticeship drop-outs but hasn't said what it would do to improve achievements.

Conservatives are likely to laud their "record" on apprenticeships throughout the campaign.

Education secretary Gillian Keegan has already begun to relentlessly post on social media about delivering more than 5.8 million apprenticeship starts and standards in nearly 70 per cent of occupations.

Labour proposes a new national body,

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CONTINUED

Skills England, to add to the mix of skills quangos.

Skills England would "drive coherence and direction to our skills landscape" by co-ordinating across government departments, as well as devolved authorities. The new "taskforce" would also decide which non-apprenticeship courses would be eligible for funding through the new levy and run a bidding process for colleges to become "technical excellence colleges".

Qualification pressures

The prospect of a Labour government has piled pressure on the party to expand on its commitment to "pause and review" the defunding of level 3 qualifications, such as BTECs, that rival T-levels.

Writing for [ITALS] *FE Week* last week, Sixth Form Colleges Association deputy chief executive James Kewin said Labour should formally pause existing plans to defund level 3 qualifications within one month of winning the election. Shadow education ministers have also failed to clarify what the "review" part of their pledge would look like.

T-levels have been lauded by Conservative education ministers as "gold standard" technical qualifications but the courses have been criticised for low uptake and high numbers of drop-outs.

The Advanced British Standard will likely feature as one of the Conservative Party's central education policy pledges. Sunak announced the ABS, which will replace A-levels and T-levels, during the government's 2023 T-level celebration week. The new qualification would increase the number of teaching hours for 16 to 19 year olds and "break down the divide" between technical and academic qualifications.

Both parties are committed to introducing the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, a new system of student loans for courses at levels 4 to 6. But its introduction is not going smoothly. Last month the Department for Education quietly delayed its introduction to January 2026 to give the Student Loans Company more time to set up its systems.



The other parties

Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, have pledged to increase per-student funding for colleges above inflation every year and widen the apprenticeship levy if they form the next government.

At its party conference last year, members passed policies that would provide a £390 million tutoring fund to support those struggling with English and maths and a £10,000 "skills wallet" for adults for 30 years of access to learning.

The initiative was first floated in 2019 when the party said adults would have access to cash at various stages in their life; £4,000 by the age of 25, £3,000 at 40 and another £3,000 at 55.

The Lib Dems also promised to boost apprentice pay to "at least" the minimum wage and reaffirmed a 2019 manifesto pledge to expand the "broken" apprenticeship levy into a broader skills and training levy.

Green Party

The Greens have promised to increase funding per learner in colleges and FE lecturer pay to match that given in schools.

A Green government would initiate a long-term funding process for FE over 10 years, nationalise awarding bodies and abolish fees in FE so it is free "at the point of use".

It also pledged to reform college governance across the sector and introduce proportional representation

on governance boards made up of 25 per cent each of local community leaders, local employers, staff /union and students.

The party also acknowledged workload and vowed that lecturers' teaching hours should be no more than 19 hours a week, and hourly paid and salaried lecturers should receive full training with five hours of remission a week to gain level 4 teaching qualifications.

Reform Party

Reform UK had one pledge for the FE sector: to increase technical courses and apprenticeships. "Value young people with vocational talents. Britain needs skilled workers in engineering, construction, IT and high demand sectors," the party's education pledge stated.





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Points mean prizes for apprentices seeking a degree

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EXCLUSIVE

Long-awaited plans to award UCAS points to apprenticeships have been revealed by the university admissions body.

From this September, people completing level 3 apprenticeships could be awarded up to 112 UCAS points to apply to universities, depending on the length of their apprenticeship.

However, the proposed tariff model would mean learners on apprenticeships lasting less than two years would not reach the typical minimum entry requirements for an undergraduate university course.

Introducing points for apprenticeships will help higher education institutions compare the programmes with other post-16 qualifications in their admissions processes, a consultation on the plans said.

The proposed UCAS tariff for apprenticeships uses the expected duration set out by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to determine the number of points. Apprentices must pass their end point assessment to be able to use UCAS points on their university applications.

Lindsay Conroy, head of apprenticeships at UCAS, said the aim was "to position level 3 apprenticeships on an equal footing with A-levels, T-levels and other UK level 3 programmes of study".

She added: "While universities and colleges are used to managing differing qualifications in their offer-making, apprenticeships have not carried tariff points to date. We want to ensure all doors are open for all students considering their next steps into higher

education, to ensure all pathways are visible to them and to maintain an informed and fair admissions system."

The UCAS proposals

UCAS has baselined level 3 achievement so a two-year apprenticeship is equivalent to three A-levels at grade C, and so is worth 96 UCAS points.

Apprenticeships lasting 18 months would be awarded 64 points and a 12-month apprenticeship would be worth 48 points under the model proposed.

UCAS said typical criteria for year-one university entry requires 72 to 128 tariff points. Between 32 and 64 points are typically required for entry to a foundation year.

As an example, the most popular apprenticeship for under-19s last year was the level 3 business administrator, which IfATE states has a typical duration of 18 months. This would give successful apprentices 64 UCAS tariff points, short of the typical minimum university entry requirements.

Achieving a 24-month apprenticeship would be equivalent to 96 tariff points and an apprenticeship lasting 36 months or longer would accrue 112 UCAS points.

Simon Ashworth, director of policy at the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, said the proposals mark "another positive step forward to ensuring proper recognition of the currency of vocational and technical programmes alongside academic equivalents which has been severely lacking".

He added: "Whilst the expected duration of level 3 apprenticeships ranges from a year to up to four years, the average expected



duration of all the 230 currently approved level 3 apprenticeships is around 25 months. For a typical level 3 apprenticeship under these proposals it would mean the awarding of the same tariff points awarded for three A-levels, which is what they should be," he added.

Not all apprenticeships come with qualifications. For those that do, apprentices can use the UCAS points attached to the qualification they've achieved if that is higher than the apprenticeship.

One model for four nations

As the tariff points system is UK-wide, UCAS has had to find a way of making its proposed model work across four countries with different apprenticeship requirements.

UCAS's consultation acknowledges "concerns" that apprentices in England could be at an advantage because they have access to apprenticeships that last longer than in Northern Ireland, where there is a two-year maximum.

And while apprentices in England can achieve pass, merit or distinction grades in their apprenticeship assessments, apprentices in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland can only achieve a pass. UCAS' proposed model therefore provides points for a pass for all UK apprentices so English apprentices can't be unfairly advantaged.

UCAS said level 4 and 5 apprentices can already apply for degree-level courses through existing accreditation of prior learning (APL) admissions.

The admissions body first announced its intention to award UCAS points to apprenticeships in March last year. Since then it has worked with around 60 organisations UK-wide to land on these proposals. The consultation will close on June 20.

Proposed UCAS tariff points for apprenticeships

Apprenticeship duration	Tariff points
36 months +	112
24 months	96
18 months	64
12 months	48

Source: UCAS

Skills Bootcamp results missing in action

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EXCLUSIVE

More than a third of the money allocated to the government's flagship Skills Bootcamps programme has gone unspent, despite learner number targets being exceeded.

The figures, published following a Freedom of Information request, suggest high numbers of participants fail to complete their course or gain employment.

Skills Bootcamps are intensive and "flexible" Department for Education-funded training programmes lasting up to three months and ending with a "guaranteed" job interview that aims to improve adults' careers in areas of national skills priorities.

Despite their significant budget – £584 million up to 2025 – the scheme had received little coverage in the national media until Tuesday, when work and pensions secretary Mel Stride claimed they would be "targeted" at sectors facing staff shortages due to tightened immigration rules.

Unexplained underspend

The government aims to train at least 150,000 people through Skills Bootcamps by next year.

Figures show that for each of the three financial years between 2020 and 2023, starts targets were surpassed. Most recently in 2022-23, enrolments totalled 40,400 against a target of 36,000.

However, just £130 million of a total £206 million allocated over the 2020 to 2023 period was spent. In 2022-23 the government allocated £150 million but only spent £85 million.

Training providers who deliver the majority of bootcamps are paid 40 per cent of the total course fee at the first "milestone" of 15 hours' guided learning hours, followed by a further 30 per cent when a participant has a job interview that is "guaranteed" as part of the course.

Providers who can show evidence their learners have found a job or moved to a more senior role at the same employer can claim the final 30 per cent payment.

The programme's underspend suggests providers are unable to claim payments for

their learners completing the bootcamp or moving into a new or better job, which account for 60 per cent of the total fee.

No proof to claim of 'great success'

Former skills minister Robert Halfon told Parliament late last year that bootcamps were a "great success" and resulted in "good" outcomes for many learners.

But the DfE does not publish outcomes data for the programme – officials only release numbers of participants.

The government has published initial research reports about bootcamp participation which included partial data on outcomes for a few thousand learners. It revealed half didn't achieve a positive employment outcome.

A follow-up report found participants were being given "inappropriate interviews", while a separate Ofsted thematic review in 2022 warned of inconsistent training quality and poor oversight from the government.

The Department for Education refused to explain the large underspend figures.

A spokesperson insisted that Skills Bootcamps provide learners with opportunities for "higher-paid, future-proofed careers".

They added that course completion and outcome data for 2021-22 was "due" to be published this summer, with further evaluation reports expected "later this year".

Delay in performance data 'unacceptable'

Stephen Evans, chief executive of the Learning and Work Institute, said that while bootcamps are a good idea "in principle", early evaluations have suggested they do not reach people who "needed the most help" such as those with lower qualification levels.

He added: "The government needs to be much more open and timely about on-programme performance; it's unacceptable that we don't have timely information on how many people complete bootcamps and find jobs."

Director of policy at the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) Simon Ashworth said bootcamps have an "important role" to play in solving the country's skills shortages.

He added some providers have "struggled to deliver Skills Bootcamps at the agreed funding levels and when funding is realised, and there is a lack of certainty about future investment post-election".

Sue Pember, policy director of adult education body HOLEX, told *FE Week* that while her organisation supported the concept of bootcamps, it had long been "concerned" about the quality of training from unproven providers.

She added that many learners who drop out are likely to struggle because they lack level 2 qualifications or English and maths skills when they start.

Bootcamp starts

	Target	Actual
2020-21	2,800	2,800
2021-22	16,000	16,120
2022-23	36,000	40,040
2023-24	50,000	Unknown
2024-25	64,000	Unknown

Bootcamp spending

	Allocated	Actual
2020-21	£13 million	£13 million
2021-22	£43 million	£32 million
2022-23	£150 million	£85 million

News

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Annual accounts blackout remains at five colleges

BILLY CAMDEN

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EXCLUSIVE

Fraud investigations into principal pay, a subcontracting probe and reclassification are among the reasons for delays to multiple college accounts this year.

The government's deadline for colleges to publish their financial statements in an easily accessible location on their website is January 31 each year to "maximise transparency and support accountability".

But Department for Education's release of its annual college accounts database revealed 21 of England's 223 colleges had not filed their 2022/23 accounts by the end of April.

An *FE Week* audit found most of the offenders have since released their accounts, but five remain under wraps.

The most high-profile delay involves Weston College, where government fraud investigators are probing "funding irregularities" involving the pay to former principal Sir Paul Phillips (see page 5).

Elsewhere, Warwickshire College Group said a government "funding assurance audit" meant its financial statements could only be issued this month. A spokesperson said the Education and Skills Funding Agency was "aware of the position" and had "granted a filing extension to the end of July 2024".

Strode College's accounts have been delayed by an ongoing investigation into a historic case of dodgy subcontracting, which involved hundreds of traineeship learners working illegal hours. The government is now seeking clawback which has shifted the college's financial health from 'outstanding' to 'inadequate'.

The FE Commissioner is currently conducting a structure and prospect appraisal at Strode, which could result in a recommendation for the college to seek a merger.

Principal John Revill told *FE Week* last month he plans to publish Strode's accounts during the summer.

South Essex College has failed to publish accounts for the past two years. A spokesperson said this was due to the reclassification of FE colleges in autumn

2022, and the subsequent need to rebroker its commercial loan with the DfE.

The college emailed copies of both sets of accounts to *FE Week* following a request on Thursday and said the financial statements would be published online in the next few days.

Emergency funding

Eastleigh College, which merged with Fareham College and City College Southampton in August 2023 to form the South Hampshire College Group, also only published its accounts following an enquiry from *FE Week*.

Eastleigh's delayed accounts show the college received more than £2 million in emergency funding from the government in 2022/23, and its financial health rating fell to 'inadequate'.

The new South Hampshire College Group will not publish accounts until next year, but Ofsted released a monitoring report this week which found 'significant progress' was being made following the merger.

The remaining colleges with unpublished accounts – St Brendan's Sixth Form College and the Windsor Forest Colleges Group – did not respond to requests for comment.



S4 Ep.5

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CEO EAUC and
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AoC stalls on college staff pay recommendation - again

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The Association of Colleges will delay making its pay recommendation for FE staff this year until the school teacher pay review is published.

But unions, told about the decision in a meeting with the membership body on Monday, warned the move would push back negotiations with individual colleges by months.

The AoC deployed the same tactic last year when it refused to make a pay recommendation unless the government coughed up extra cash so colleges could make "a meaningful offer" to staff.

The move was followed by an announcement in June for additional 16-to-19 funding of £470 million to be dished out over the next two academic years: £185 million in 2023/24 and £285 million in 2024/25.

Unions have said their pay demands for 2024/25 can be met with this additional funding.

It took until September for the AoC to make a 6.5 per cent pay rise deal to colleges last year, mirroring the schoolteacher pay rise recommendation by the arms-length School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) in July.

AoC chief executive David Hughes said: "Last year, the government was able to find additional funding to ensure that the pay gap between school and college teachers did not get even wider, and we want to give them the chance to do so again this year. Therefore, we will not be making a recommendation until the STRB report has been published."

Demand for 10 per cent pay rise

Talks between the AoC and a group of five trade unions began this week following the unions' pay claim for 2024/25 submitted in March.

The National Joint Forum of unions representing Unite, University and College Union, Unison, GMB and the National Education Union demanded a 10 per cent



David Hughes

Jo Grady

pay rise for FE staff next year, or a £3,000 salary increase, to keep pace with inflation.

The pay demand is above the 3.2 per cent consumer price index and 4.3 per cent retail price index inflation rates for the year to March 2024.

The AoC said at the time that unions should "focus their energies" on demanding the government raise the funding rates which haven't kept up with inflation.

The AoC also called for a £30,000 minimum starting salary for FE lecturers, matching schools, and urged college bosses to address the 40 per cent real-terms pay decline for FE staff since 2009/10 and the "steep" rises in the cost of living.

Unions maintained some demands from last year including colleges having class size recommendations, a "national policy on the delivery of guided learning hours", and to have a binding national pay agreement.

New claims include a demand for staff to have two mental health days per year and a commitment to close gender, ethnic and disability pay gaps.

Hughes said: "AoC met with the college staff unions on May 20 to begin pay negotiations for 2024/25. There is strong agreement between employer and staff representatives on the need to improve pay in the FE sector, and AoC has been campaigning consistently for the pay gap between school and FE teachers to be eradicated."

The University and College Union said: "Pay

across the FE sector has been stagnant for far too long which is why we urgently need a new deal for FE. Whilst it is important for AoC to attempt to source further additional funding to resolve the pay gap between school and college teachers, waiting to see what the teachers' pay review board recommends could mean we are waiting for months, and our members need a pay rise now.

"Our claim is about more than pay. We need binding national outcomes in FE just as there are for schools and sixth forms across England."

Stalled until after general election

The AoC said the decision to delay its pay recommendation was due to its campaign to eradicate the pay gap between school and FE teachers.

This year's STRB report has not yet been released by the government. Teacher union NASUWT said last week it feared ministers would delay the report until after a general election.

"The pay review body is not the property of the education secretary," said Dr Patrick Roach, NASUWT general secretary. "Teachers and employers have a right to know immediately the opinions and recommendations of the School Teachers Review Body, without interference from ministers."

In previous years the pay report has not been published until late July.

News

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Exam prices soar but they're fair, says Ofqual

ANVIKSHA PATEL
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Exam fee rises outstripped inflation in the last year, Ofqual data shows, but value for money for general and vocational qualifications remained “broadly unchanged”.

The average cost of a vocational technical qualification hit £69.39 in February, 5.5 per cent up on last year, while fees for general qualifications soared 6.4 per cent.

“Price rises of the magnitude that are reported are to be expected”

The average cost of a GCSE was up 6.6 per cent to £51.15, while A-levels rose 5.8 per cent to £121.39 and AS-level prices increased 6.8 per cent to £69.47.

Consumer prices inflation over the same 12-month period was 3.8 per cent.

The exam regulator's analysis, however, said exam fees rose in line with inflation over the last two years, which suggested that qualifications' value for money “is broadly unchanged from two years ago”.

Last year college leaders raised the alarm over price rises – while most increases were around 4 per cent, England's biggest exam board AQA raised prices by up to 16.5 per cent.

College leaders warned their already strained financial budgets were being stretched “even further” by exam costs.

Propelled by inflation

Data shows that in 2021, general qualification exam fees rose 2.6 per cent and then jumped up 6.5 per cent between 2022 and 2023. For vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs), prices increased 1.2 per cent between 2021 and 2022 and 4.7 per cent between 2022 and 2023.

Inflation between 2022 and 2023 was 9.2 per cent.

Ofqual said it was “more helpful” to examine prices over a 24-month period to account for the lag between awarding organisations' cost pressures, their subsequent exam fee hike and the “uncharacteristically high inflation of the past couple of years”.

It said: “Given economic conditions and development associated with ongoing reform, price rises of the magnitude that are reported are to be expected.

“Ofqual has been, and continues to be, notified of above-inflation price rises and scrutinises these rises in their local market context.”

England has more than 250 awarding

organisations which receive more than £700 million in revenue from exam fees, Ofqual estimates.

The statistics on VTQs include, BTECs, Cambridge Nationals and functional skills but exclude apprenticeship end-point assessments.

“Ofqual scrutinises these rises in their local market context”

Ofqual found inflation was relatively uniform across the different levels with the highest inflation being in qualifications for level 4 and above at 5.7 per cent, and the lowest being in level 1 and level 1/2 qualifications at 5.1 per cent.

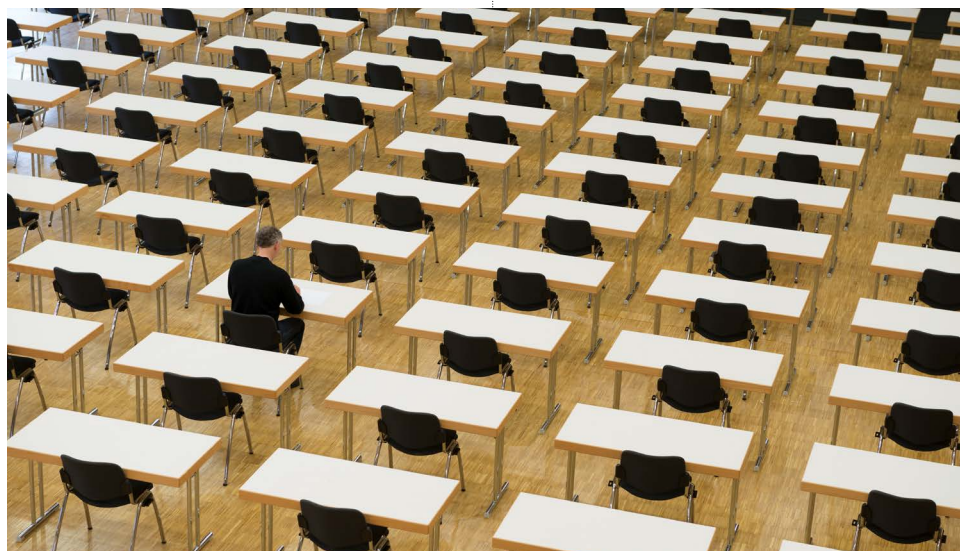
But the highest exam rise was recorded in construction and planning sector subjects, where prices rose 8.5 per cent to an average of £79.19.

Exam reform has impact

Ofqual also suggested that changes to educational policy and reform would impact qualification fees. Reform such as the removal of 16-to-19 funding for level 3 qualifications overlapping T-levels, combined with the rollout of T-levels, would likely have a “diffuse” impact on pricing.

It said: “Given the multi-year timescales that reforms take place across, increases in short-term costs linked with development of new qualifications may lead awarding organisations to adjust their fees across their wider portfolio.

“Awarding organisations also need to invest to ensure resilient delivery across their qualification portfolios, including maintaining their operational capacity to ensure secure delivery of assessments, particularly in the context of an ever-evolving technological landscape. The cost of such necessary additional investment may also contribute to price movements.”



MPs want financial literacy alternative to GCSE resits

BILLY CAMDEN
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A financial literacy qualification should be created as an alternative to GCSE maths resits as part of government plans for an Advanced British Standard, MPs have said.

The parliamentary education committee this week urged ministers to provide post-16 students with "comprehensive financial education" as a "priority" in proposals to continue maths education to the age of 18.

Financial education has formally been part of the national school curriculum since 2014 but it is not currently compulsory in post-16 education in England.

During a recent inquiry, MPs heard from broadcaster and Money Saving Expert founder Martin Lewis that there are people entering the workplace who "do not understand their pay cheques, or that their tax code number is their responsibility".

The committee said financial education was "crucial" for 16-to-18-year-olds, many of whom were transitioning into the workplace, paying tax, considering applying for a student loan and living away from home for the first time.

Despite this, MPs found that around half of pupils in state-funded schools do not go on to participate in maths at post-16, while an additional third are forced to study maths after age 16 to meet the controversial condition-of-funding rule.

Resits dent confidence

The report suggested that the process of resitting maths, through either the GCSE or a functional skills alternative, often leads to "reduced confidence with low expectations of success". Experts told the committee that forced resits can present a "lasting sense of failure" and leave students feeling "disillusioned and disengaged" from maths.

November 2023 results showed 22.2 per cent of almost 61,000 students aged 17 to 19 who resat maths last year achieved a grade 4 or above in England, considered by

the government as a standard pass.

This was a fall of 8 per cent on the previous year when 24.2 per cent achieved at least a standard pass, and down 16 per cent on pre-pandemic 2019 when the pass rate was 26.4 per cent.

The education committee urged the government to address this as part of its plans for the Advanced British Standard (ABS) – a proposed baccalaureate that would replace A-levels and T-levels over the next 10 years, and will result in students studying English and maths to 18 alongside "majors" and "minors" in other subjects.

Ministers should "consider offering a specific qualification in financial literacy which could fit into the ABS as a minor subject," the report said.

This would "provide opportunities for progression for students who may not be able to take A-level maths but show an interest or aptitude in improving their financial knowledge".

And critically, this could be a "useful alternative to the GCSE retake for those who do not achieve a grade 4 or above in mathematics", according to the MPs.

Their report added: "We welcome the government's proposals to make mathematics compulsory learning for all students up to the age of 18. Whichever form this takes, whether through the ABS or otherwise, the government must ensure that the mathematics programme includes financial literacy as a fundamental part of

the curriculum."

Redouble recruitment focus

MPs also urged the government to "redouble its focus" on recruitment and retention of maths teachers, where demand would increase "substantially" under a maths-to-18 policy.

The report said evidence shows existing targets are not being met. It also quoted data that shows only 63 per cent of the required secondary school maths teachers were recruited in the academic year 2023/24.

It added it was "clear" through the inquiry that the challenge of recruiting more maths teachers was a "particular challenge in the post-16 space".

Last year's inaugural release of the Department for Education's annual statistics on the FE workforce revealed an average of 5.5 per cent of all teaching positions were vacant across further education providers. Shortages are particularly felt in subjects such as maths, physics, construction and engineering.

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "Being financially literate relies on a solid understanding of maths and we have reformed the curriculum and invested substantially over £100 million in the Maths Hubs programme. The ABS will build on this and see all young people study maths and English to 18, giving them the essential skills they need to succeed."



News

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Apprenticeship guarantee call revived by CIPD

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Employers have renewed calls for an “apprenticeship guarantee” to reverse a collapse in apprenticeship starts for young people.

The then prime minister Boris Johnson made national media headlines in 2020 when he backed such a proposal put forward by former skills minister Robert Halfon.

But the idea was never developed and was soon forgotten.

Now, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has brought it back into play in a report that highlights a stark drop in apprenticeship starts for young people as employers rebadge training for existing staff as apprenticeships to make use of their levy contributions.

Meanwhile, questions remain over how apprenticeships can be “guaranteed”, given that apprenticeships are jobs and the government cannot force employers to offer them.

Here are the key takeaways from the CIPD report.

Dramatic fall among young people...

CIPD’s report included a survey of 2,000 employers, which found 60 per cent think the primary purpose of apprenticeships should be supporting young people to enter the workplace. Just 15 per cent of employers said apprenticeships should primarily be used to develop existing staff.

Despite this, government data shows a 41 per cent fall in apprenticeship starts for the under 19s and a 36 per cent decline for those aged 19 to 24 between 2015/16 and 2022/23.

...SME starts also ‘collapse’

Figures show that between 2016/17 and 2020/21 apprenticeship starts for small employers decreased by nearly half (-45 per cent), and in medium-sized enterprises starts dropped by more than half (-56 per cent).

Larger employers also saw a decline but this was notably less pronounced (-14 per cent).

CIPD said the “collapse” in apprenticeship starts among SMEs had “undermined” opportunities for young people as it was this



Boris Johnson

group of employers who were more likely to take on young apprentices and train people with lower qualification levels.

Employers ‘incentivised’ to rebadge training

CIPD repeated warnings, raised in the past by Ofsted and multiple think tanks, that employers had been “incentivised” to rebadge existing training courses as apprenticeships to access their apprenticeship levy money.

More than half (54 per cent) of organisations paying the levy that responded to CIPD’s survey “admitted they had converted existing training activity into apprenticeships programmes to claim back their allowance”.

Backing for ‘apprenticeship guarantee’ – but is it possible?

To combat these trends, 89 per cent of employers in CIPD’s survey supported the HR body’s recommendation of an apprenticeship guarantee for young people up to the age of 24.

In 2009, the Labour government attempted to establish an apprentice guarantee through the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act, but the plans ultimately fell through.

A recent paper titled *The Economy 2030 Inquiry* explained that the 2009 act placed a duty on the chief executive of the Skills Funding Agency to ensure an offer of an apprenticeship place to all qualified 16 to 18-year-old applicants.

The paper said the young person could choose an apprenticeship at either level 2 or level 3, but they must be “suitably qualified” with GCSE English and maths and be placed within a “reasonable travel area”.

It was planned the guarantee would be enforced in 2013 but after the change of

government in 2010 that part of the act was repealed.

Authors of *The Economy 2030 Inquiry* said the proposal “remains the best vision of the system we need to create for people up to age 24”, but noted issues around funding, supply and low English and maths pass rates.

In May 2020 the idea of an apprenticeship guarantee resurfaced when Boris Johnson said during a televised Covid briefing that “it is going to be vital that we guarantee apprenticeships for young people”.

The government has never since said it would adopt an “apprenticeship guarantee” as policy and the idea appeared to be quickly dropped.

Newly elected mayor of the West Midlands Richard Parker included an “apprenticeship guarantee” for young people in his manifesto but didn’t detail how it would be implemented.

The Association of Employment and Learning Providers and the Association of Colleges are split over whether such a guarantee is possible.

During a Lords committee on the future of skills this week, AELP chief executive Ben Rowland said: “I don’t think you can guarantee an apprenticeship to anyone because you’re saying I can guarantee you a job. We can’t guarantee people jobs. If we could, then we wouldn’t have 850,000 NEETs, we wouldn’t have the many millions we have out of the labour market.”

AoC boss David Hughes said an apprenticeship guarantee pledge would be a “very strong clarion call for all different stakeholders to think differently about the future”.

He added: “We allow higher education to be completely demand led, so that anyone who’s got the qualifications to start a higher education qualification is funded through an income contingent loan.

“If colleges and training providers knew that they would be funded for every young person to support them in an apprenticeship it puts this on the way towards being really attractive to employers.”

CIPD skills adviser Lizzie Crowley writes about what it will take to deliver an apprenticeship guarantee in this week’s edition of *FE Week* (see page 26).

Ministers plan to appoint edtech evidence checkers

LUCAS CUMISKEY
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Experts would be hired to help schools and colleges decide what education technology was worth buying under a government proposal for artificial intelligence training.

The government is seeking a provider to run the scheme and “help education professionals take advantage of AI’s potential”, a tender document reveals.

Alongside the so-called edtech evidence checkers, plans include an “online resource that covers essential training for all teachers” and a tool kit to help leaders when “embedding effective” AI practice.

A consultation on AI last year showed “the number one request from educators is further training and guidance on its safe use”.

The Department for Education said the plans were in the “early stage of development”. It is currently “judging interest from potential suppliers” for the multi-year project, worth between £1 million and £5 million.

Rose Luckin, a professor of learner-centred design at University College London, said the plans were a “critical and welcome step forward”.

She added: “As AI becomes more prevalent in education, it’s crucial teachers have the knowledge and skills to leverage it effectively, confidently and responsibly.”

Looking under edtech bonnet

The DfE tender document outlines plans for a “project team to facilitate the running of an edtech evidence board of experts”, who will “quality assure evidence of edtech product efficacy against set criteria”.

The plan would help schools and colleges know which products are “grounded in evidence”.

Education secretary Gillian Keegan has previously called on edtech firms to be “transparent” with schools and colleges about the evidence behind their products, saying: “We should have the same expectations for robust evidence in edtech as we do elsewhere in education”.

Under the plans, edtech firms would be asked to “submit evidence of product efficacy”, which “area-specific committees would [then] assess”.

“Their decisions would be scrutinised and ratified by an overarching board, before being published,” the DfE added.

The project team, board and committees would create the criteria against which to assess the evidence.

Help to ‘have a go’

Meanwhile, the training offer would likely include a website and “the opportunity for trainees to start ‘having a go’ at prompting a simple AI system”.

Five to 10 grants would be dished out to teachers or organisations to “develop case studies on effective practice in successfully implementing widely available AI tools in schools and colleges”.

And extra training would also be offered to support teachers in “developing more advanced skills through a series of live webinars covering different techniques for the use of AI”.

Ministers are keen for schools and colleges to take advantage of the AI revolution by using it for purposes such as streamlining administrative tasks to slash workload, while being alive to the risks.

But the DfE’s policy paper on generative AI in education says content created can be inaccurate, inappropriate, biased, out of date or unreliable.

Edtech investor Richard Taylor, managing director of MediaTaylor, said if a school or college was “really interested” it could do “half the stuff” being proposed already by researching how to enter a prompt for an AI tool such as ChatGPT.

He added: “You’ve got to work out how you’re going to do it in a way that doesn’t add more pressure on teachers or on the very scarce amount of professional development time they’ve got.”

He also questioned how the project would “get beyond the enthusiastic early adopters” of AI and cut through to the “meaty middle” of the teacher workforce.

AI too ‘unreliable’ to assess work

In November, a YouGov poll of 1,012 teachers in the UK found almost two thirds thought AI was too unreliable to assess students’ work or help with resource or lesson planning.

Jodie Lopez, an edtech business consultant, said training teachers on AI use in education was “definitely welcomed and needed”, but added: “There is a lack of CPD more widely in technology use in education and for some educators a sudden leap to AI is premature.”

Some schools and colleges still “struggled to get decent wi-fi”, she added.

Taylor suggested the DfE would be better off running “a consultation process first to work out what schools, colleges and teachers want, what they know and what are people doing elsewhere”.

The DfE declined to comment.



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INTRODUCING

MARK
BREMNERChief executive,
MBKB Group

‘Judge them on
the quality of
work they do’

JESSICA HILL
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A rock 'n' roll career has resulted in a high-energy business with unconventional holiday rules, reveals boss Mark Bremner

To some, Mark Bremner is known as the boss who lets staff at his training business take as many holidays as they want.

But to others he's a builder, a failed barrister, tech nerd, record label founder, fantasy fiction writer and a frustrated rock music merchandiser. He was also once made bankrupt.

His journey to the top job at MBKB – which has an 'outstanding' rating from Ofsted – is anything

but conventional.

The self-confessed “fidget” has taken his legendary energy from one venture to the next, but tells me he's finally settled after “finding his tribe” among his 108 staff in Dudley, in the West Midlands.

Sitting at home in front of a Beatles calendar, Bremner says his first career dream aged 14 was to be a software developer after he created a database for his school and a “light pen” that could draw on a screen.

His dad was unimpressed. Bremner says: “He told me ‘no one's gonna make any money sat in front of one of those things’, which I reminded him about several times years later.”

But the MBKB founder and chief executive

learnt vital leadership lessons from his dad. As “an impetuous” teenager, he was initially outraged when he went to work on his father's building sites and discovered the workers were allowed extra-long lunch breaks to listen to sporting events on the radio.

His dad told him: “If we can get five hours of good work out of these guys every day, that's all we need...You judge them on the quality of the work they do.”

Broken and bankrupt

After forgetting all ideas of a computing career, Bremner took a course in building studies at Dudley College, then worked at Bryant Construction and for his dad before setting up his

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Winning Dudley TEC Provider of the year 2001 with Protocol skills

own firm, DMA Construction.

Things were going “really well” when he took on a £700,000 contract for a large office refurbishment. But then his client’s middleman stopped making payments for work done and gave a reassurance this “slight cashflow hiccup” would be rectified. So Bremner “took a punt” and finished the job.

His company ended up being owed £220,000, with Bremner owing £175,000 to subcontractors who he promised to pay back with interest.

Two years later, aged 27, Bremner racked up £40,000 in legal fees after taking his debtor to court.

Although he won, the defendant declared themselves bankrupt the following day – leaving Bremner forced to do the same.

It was an “incredibly stressful” time for Bremner, who had a two year old and newborn baby. He borrowed from his wife’s brother to save the family home.

Then one of Bremner’s suppliers, who was owed £4,000, took him to court. On the steps outside beforehand, Bremner pleaded with the man and his solicitor to settle. They refused, instead telling Bremner’s wife “be prepared to lose your house”.

Representing himself, Bremner questioned why they should “jump to the top of the list” as he owed several other people money too. The judge threw the case out, and back outside Bremner told his antagonists “you’ll never see a penny of that debt as long as I live”.

Laughed out of the room

Now armed with experience of being at the sharp

end of debt collection, Bremner thought he’d put all he’d learnt to good use in the legal world and train as a barrister. But he only lasted a few weeks. “There were so many really inspiring youngsters already ahead of me in their journey,” he says. And a lawyer’s wages are “not like in the movies”.

He applied for work as a business consultant but was “almost laughed out the room” because of his bankruptcy. He wore the setback as a “badge of honour”, believing his experience was “a lesson”, which

“taught me a lot of valuable things”. He adds: “I learnt not to be so trusting financially.”

Feeling like a lost soul, Bremner went to work at his wife Kathy’s nursery.

Realising the strength of her business came from the staff, Bremner organised for them to be trained up for free when Spring Skills (which later became Protocol Skills) offered fully funded level-three NVQs in customer service.

The workers passed in three months, although Bremner admits with the current childcare sector challenges “you couldn’t do that now”.

Going Platinum

Bremner applied for a job with Protocol in 1999 as a leadership and management trainer.

He tells me he was given “quite the speech” from the manager during his interview about the industry’s “three P’s” – “the pressure’s insane, the pay’s appalling and there’s no promotional opportunities”.

But after a week in the job his manager was sacked and, “much to everyone’s amusement”, Bremner got a promotion.

At the time, Protocol was the UK’s largest work-based training provider but Bremner believed it was “too rigid”. He says there was a “massive gap” in the market for childcare training and became “disillusioned” when he was blocked from pursuing that growth. He sought the company’s permission to explore these “unique opportunities” through his own business.

Striking that agreement wasn’t a smooth process, but “ultimately” the resulting

“gentleman’s agreement” allowed Bremner to contract with the Learning and Skills Council through the company he formed, Platinum Training, on the condition he wouldn’t “tread on Protocol’s toes” and would only operate in the childcare sector.

Platinum grew from 20 to 400 apprentices in two years but hit a “roadblock” when the Learning and Skills Council didn’t extend their contract, leaving them with “zero income” for four months.

The firm’s first Ofsted inspection in 2004 awarded it with “grade twos and threes across the board” – enough to persuade the Learning and Skills Council to turn the funding taps back on.

Rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle

Then In 2009, Bremner lost his father “out of the blue”. His children were aged 15, 13 and nine and the shock prompted a realisation for Bremner that he’d spent “a great swathe” of their young lives working.

“I learned not to be so trusting financially”

Platinum by then had 87 staff, and while Bremner could see changes afoot with technical certificates and the move from key skills to functional skills, he admits he had “lost interest” in the business.

He grabbed an offer to sell up for £3 million in 2010 and took a year off.

It was at this point his career went a little off-piste. After renovating his house, Bremner achieved his childhood dream of writing a book – a fantasy fiction, entitled *Intervention*, about devils and angels. “It turns out I’m not very good at writing books,” he admits.

Then he became “incensed” by the “lazy” style of a John Lennon T-shirt he spotted on holiday at Hard Rock Hotel in Orlando, Florida. It featured a “standard” picture of the star with the lyrics of the song *Imagine*.

He believed rock concert T-shirts at that time were “cheap and horrible” and thought he and his graphic designer brother-in-law could do better.

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Sadly, retail giant Primark had the same idea and so the licences the pair needed were yanked from their grasp.

At the same time, Bremner's son Daniel started a band, first called Audio Disease, then renamed EofE, who were "getting a bit of notoriety".

"Not to do anything by halves", Bremner then set up a record label, Cream Record Corp, to manage them.

"We're in a throw your toys out the pram world"

He tells me he "pulled every string" to get them on tour with McBusted, then The Vamps. They were tantalisingly close to getting their big break after "touring relentlessly" for 20 months, but then they fell out and it was all over.

'Unlimited holiday'

By then, previous employer Paragon had embarked on a restructuring which released a "massive wealth of talent" onto the market, tempting Bremner back into the training game.

Bremner says he had "missed the sector" and "learned a lot from the retail and record industry" he wanted to put into practice – by "doing it our own way".

So in 2015, MBKB was formed and staff were told "pick your own hours"; and offered "unlimited holidays". He tells me: "My accountant and business partner still can't get his head around this."

MBKB started with a focus on childcare but times were tough because they had to "subcontract to colleges" which Bremner tells me "clipped our wings in terms of innovation".

Then with the introduction of the apprenticeships levy, funding was slashed because the childcare framework did not become a standard.

Bremner considered "closing

the doors" but decided to "repivot" into payroll instead. By this time, his agreement not to compete with Protocol had expired, giving him freedom to access other opportunities.

By 2018 he had 12 staff, including his youngest daughter. An inquiry from the revived travel brand Thomas Cook became the big break they needed.

Bremner says: "We were this tiny little company in Dudley that no one's heard of, then Thomas Cook call [about payroll]."

Pets at Home, several NHS Trusts and local authorities followed. And Brent Council asked MBKB to collaborate on an internal audit, which brought about a new niche for the provider.

"The world and his dog" were delivering leadership and management training, so Bremner felt it would be "difficult to rise above that noise". But later, they added HR and coaching as an add-on for companies.

On-off months

Bremner was "horrified" when an Ofsted monitoring visit in 2019 found MBKB only making "reasonable progress". He "fought" the judgement but to no avail.

Then Covid hit them hard financially. A silver lining was the guidance service they could provide on navigating furlough requirements.

Ofsted in 2022 rated MBKB as 'outstanding' in all but one category (personal development was 'good'), which Bremner welcomed as "giving us something to aim for".

But he worries "getting 'outstanding' is often a precursor to a downfall".

"Mistakes" were made in 2023, when in "certain months we grew too quickly" and apprenticeship starts had to be delayed.

To manage the flow better, the company

embarked on a process of "on-off months"; so apprentices were recruited one month, and paperwork and initial assessments were done the next.

Giving the anti-sell

Bremner says the high number of people leaving apprenticeships early is frustrating and tells me we live in a "throw your toys out of the pram world where people quit".

MBKB tries to combat this by "lovingly" doing "an anti-sell", giving the apprentices "all the negatives about the apprenticeship and why they shouldn't do it" to weed out unsuitable candidates.

Achievement rates were a "grim" 52 per cent for last year partly because "a lot of programmes" began before end-point assessments (EPAs) were in place. MBKB was the first provider to put corporate responsibility and sustainability apprentices through assessments, but there were "teething problems" with those EPAs.

Bremner believes working for MBKB is "probably 25 per cent more difficult" than for other providers, because "we're very stringent on what we want".

But he still allows staff to work the hours they want, although the business has "slightly tightened up" with team members who are "new to the industry".

With a career path that's taken so many twists and turns, is Bremner still seeking the next big thing?

The answer is no. He tells me: "I've found my tribe with the people at MBKB. I'm very happy here."



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The newly structured Queen Alexandra Charity, Birmingham offers you the chance to have a positive impact as you join a committed group of colleagues in ensuring that all students achieve their aims and aspirations. We are dedicated to providing exceptional education and support to students with diverse learning needs and life experiences. Our specialist

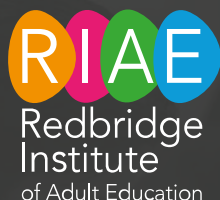
setting fosters an inclusive community where every student is valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential.

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- Be a voice for students and staff in specialist education
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- Develop your own skills, aspirations and progress your career.

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Programme Manager for ESOL

Size of Post: Full time, permanent
(36 hours per week x 52 weeks per annum)

Salary: £39,732 to £46,146 per annum (Pay award pending)
(qualifications and experience determine rate of pay)

Redbridge Institute of Adult Education is a local authority adult and community learning provider engaging around 4,000 part-time adult learners each year, 84% of whom are residents. The Institute is the only Ofsted "outstanding" local authority provider in London. (Ofsted May 2018).

We seek an exceptionally dynamic and innovative **Programme Manager** to lead, design, plan and monitor our comprehensive range of ESOL programmes, spanning from qualification-based to community learning initiatives. You will have extensive ESOL sector knowledge with demonstratable experience, success and a track record in managing educational programmes and adult learning. You will have passion and commitment for shaping the future of our ESOL provision creating and overseeing a dynamic ESOL curriculum that includes non-regulated, regulated, and community-focused provisions.

You will be an innovative and strategic thinker, driving and promoting advancements in teaching methodologies and curriculum development of a diverse and comprehensive learning program tailored to our varied learner demographics.

You will collaborate with borough-wide stakeholders to develop enrichment programs, building and maintaining collaborative working

with partners across the community to enhance our program's reach and impact.

You will be a strong communicator who will lead, manage, and inspire a team of dedicated tutors, fostering an environment of excellence in teaching, learning, and assessment driving innovation in curriculum delivery keeping pace with the evolving needs of our learners and the broader educational landscape.

Interviews to be held week commencing 10th June 2024

We only accept applications on our standard application form available from our website at www.redbridge-iae.ac.uk which must be emailed to jobapplications@redbridge-iae.ac.uk to be received by Midnight Tuesday 28th May 2024.



**VICE PRINCIPAL:****LEARNER EXPERIENCE & INCLUSION**

Salary: £89,789 p.a.

Gower College Swansea is a large further education college with over 4,500 full-time and 8,000 part-time learners – including 3,000 apprentices – from across Swansea and neighbouring counties studying each year. The college operates from seven locations, is one of the largest employers in the region and has an annual turnover of just under £60m.

We are excited to announce the search for a Vice Principal: Learner Experience & Inclusion. This pivotal role will be responsible for the strategic leadership and management of a holistic, inclusive and comprehensive learner experience. The successful candidate will be responsible for the strategic oversight of safeguarding, student support and the wellbeing of all our learners. The role requires a visionary leader adept in setting strategic direction and enhancing the learner experience to ensure the academic success of all learners is promoted and advanced across all campuses.

We have appointed FE Associates to support us with this important appointment. Contact Suzanne.Thurlow@fea.co.uk to discuss the role before the closing date.

**Closing date: 9am on Monday 3 June 2024****Interview date: Monday 17 June 2024****VISIT**www.fea.co.uk/gcs-vp/**DIRPRWY BENNAETH:****PROFIAD Y DYSGWR A CHYNHWYSIANT**

Cyflog: £89,789 p.a.

Mae Coleg Gŵyr Abertawe yn goleg addysg bellach mawr gyda thros 4,500 o ddysgwyr amser llawn ac 8,000 o ddysgwyr rhan-amser – gan gynnwys 3,000 o brentisiaid – o bob rhan o Abertawe a'r siroedd cyfagos yn astudio bob blwyddyn. Mae'r Coleg yn gweithredu o saith lleoliad, ac mae'n un o'r cyflogwyr mwyaf yn yr ardal gyda throsiant blyneddol o ychydig dan £60m.

Rydym yn gyffrous i gyhoeddi ein bod yn chwilio am Ddirprwy Bennaeth: Profiad y Dysgwr a Chynhwysiant. Bydd y rôl allweddol hon yn gyfrifol am arwain a rheoli profiad y dysgwr sy'n gyfannol, yn gynhwysol ac yn gynhwysfawr. Bydd yr ymgeisydd llwyddiannus yn gyfrifol am oruchwyllo diogelu, cymorth i fyfyrwyr a lles pob un o'n ddysgwyr. Mae'r rôl yn gofyn am arweinydd â gweledigaeth sy'n fedrus wrth osod cyfeiriad strategol a gwella profiad y dysgwr i sicrhau bod llwyddiant academaidd yr holl ddysgwyr yn cael ei hyrwyddo a'i ddatblygu ar draws pob campus.

Rydym wedi penodi FE Associates i'n cynorthwyo gyda'r penodiad pwysig hwn. Cysylltwch â Suzanne.Thurlow@fea.co.uk i drafod yr ôl cyn y dyddiad cau.

**Dyddiad cau: 9am dydd Llun 3 Mehefin 2024****Dyddiad cyfweiliad: dydd Llun 17 Mehefin 2024****EWCH I**www.fea.co.uk/gcs-vp/**Abingdon
& Witney
College****Vice Principal People and Culture****Salary £81,965**

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Our Strategic Plan is based around the philosophy of Be You. Be Extraordinary. We are confident that we support our students and staff to be themselves and to be extraordinary, whatever that means for them, and we recognise that our staff team and our culture have been central to our successes to date. This new post is a further investment in our positive future.

We are looking for a strategic leader and commercial thinker who can align people initiatives with the College values and aspirations. If this sounds like you, and you are an energetic, proactive and dynamic leader looking for a new opportunity, then we would love to hear from you!

For more information, please email:
helpmeh@abingdon-witney.ac.uk

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THE STAFF ROOM

Dispatches from the frontline of FE

AI should stand for Assessment Intelligence – but we must adapt

Developing assessments that reflect what's already happening in industry is the challenge of the next decade, explains Dan Phillips

You don't need me to tell you that AI represents a watershed moment, a pivotal point in education, or a revolution on a par with the last one. And it genuinely is, by the way. AI has made designing lesson resources, pitching for jobs, authoring drafts of technical documents, and, well, anything that you've put off, quicker, easier, and more possible. Just make sure you check its output first.

“Talking about AI with students must keep happening”

Teachers are, of course, the real creatives when it comes to finding the use cases for our digital friends of ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and the others. A mystery in English, done. A business marketing strategy, bam. A case study of your choice, well there it is.

While there is some debate on how to get the best out of these bots, the core teaching skills of defining objectives, precise instructions on what you are looking for, and giving it feedback and asking for



DANIEL PHILLIPS

PGCE programme
lead, Hull College

improvements are conveniently essential.

In its advice on ‘prompt crafting’ in Copilot, Microsoft even uses the acronym of GCSE, this time meaning Goal, Context, Source and Expectation. A goal giving it precise instructions on what you want (an essay plan), the context of who will be using it (for A-level sociology students), a source such as material to include (on crime and deviance), and then giving clear expectations (500 words, include headings) will help ensure the bot keeps on track.

But just as we need practice to develop our ‘AI literacy’, talking about what works with chatbots and AI with students is a conversation that needs to keep happening.

AI, as it currently stands, is very good at developing frameworks, models and providing feedback. Used to refine ideas and suggest a plan of action it can be an excellent guide for students to start to structure their work. However, pasting student text into the bot will mean it's swallowed for its training data in most cases. So don't do it.

But AI often falls into an

‘uncanny valley’ where it is used to write an assignment, especially when used by those looking to solve the problem of a pressing deadline. It looks close to the ‘real’ thing but fails to hit the mark. This is changing by the day as the technology grows and even now no one can pinpoint AI-generated text with certainty all the time. Not you, not me, not any of the AI detectors.

This is where AI literacy, clear guidelines for student use and reforming our formative and summative assessment strategies are becoming essential.

For continuously assessed courses, that might mean presentations or research tasks that are more focused and require a level of practicality.

For written exam-based subjects, seeing what AI generates and improving upon it or critiquing that output can be a convenient source of ‘synthetic’ examples. And as far as maths goes, there are better tools out there to answer questions with, but generating long-form

functional questions is something AI tackles with enthusiasm.

Teachers are already moving in these directions, but if you haven't asked one of the bots a question from your course, try it. It can be quite a sobering moment seeing words flow with fury from the page.

The most popular chatbot currently defaults to a list style and an over-use of ‘furthermore’s’, ‘moreovers’, and ‘in conclusions’ if asked to write an essay, but those markers will change as it adapts to what its users want.

Combining theoretical assignments with the skills we want students to develop for their professions has always been the mission of further education. This will make it more so.

These assessment reforms will need not only to ensure student work remains authentic, but also respond to how AI is being incorporated into the workplace.

This will look different in

each vocation. Whether that's using the bots to develop presentation materials, incorporating these technologies to super-charge office and editing packages, or deploying image

recognition that diagnoses problems in engineering, gaining familiarity with what is already happening in our industries and authentically mirroring that in college will be the challenge of the decade.



Opinion

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The levy isn't working – and Labour's plans just might fix it



STEPHEN EVANS

Chief executive,
Learning and
Work Institute

If we're going to scrutinise Labour's plans for levy reform, we need to accept the policy's failures and base our judgment on better maths, says Stephen Evans

It's good we have an apprenticeship levy; many apprenticeships are great and quality has improved. But few would argue it's working just fine and should stay exactly as it is.

Apprenticeship take-up has fallen by one-third since the levy and other reforms were introduced, with even larger drops for young people. Completion rates are low, and higher apprenticeships have the same access issues as other higher education courses.

For many large employers the levy has become their training budget, skewed to older workers and learning at higher levels. That's important, but with a fixed pot of money it's come at the expense of training for young people and at lower levels. This is training which would have huge productivity benefits too and where the UK's historic underinvestment in skills is starkest.

And yet we have an employer-led system in which employers say they can't get what they want and where they're investing £3.5 billion (7 per cent) less in training.

The need for reform is clear. The question is what reform, particularly in a policy area beset by chop and change.

Labour proposes to replace the apprenticeship levy with a skills and growth levy, allowing employers to spend up to half their levy on training outside

apprenticeships. A new body, Skills England, would help decide what training should be fundable.

The argument is that apprenticeships aren't the answer to everything; the current system is like a golfer going out with just a putter. Greater flexibility will allow employers to hit a bigger range of shots.

Some argue this would halve the number of apprenticeships, with large employers spending far more of their levy funds and leaving little for apprenticeships at SMEs. But that's both vanishingly unlikely and focused on the wrong question.

Making unlikely assumptions

First, it would mean some highly improbable employer choices. For apprenticeships to halve, large employers would have to keep spending what they are on apprenticeships and spend the rest of their levy on other training too. This doubling of training investment would be some reversal of the 26 per cent fall in training spend per employee since 2005.

It is far more likely that levy-paying employers would switch some higher apprenticeships to

qualification-based training. That would be a good thing if that training better suited the needs of the business.

After all, our research shows some employers are shoehorning training into apprenticeships to use up their levy funds rather than because it's right for them.

"It's like a golfer going out with just a putter"

This switch could also reduce the average cost per trainee at higher levels, because many of the alternative training routes would be lower cost than higher apprenticeships. All else being equal, that could free up *more* funding for apprenticeships at SMEs and for young people.

Employment gains will boost levy

Second, rules for employers and growth in the levy budget can help. Rising employment and earnings mean the levy is projected to raise another £736 million by 2028-29. This will give headroom, even though some of that cash will be needed to increase apprenticeship

standard rates to reflect rising costs.

And Labour's policy is 'up to 50 per cent' flexibility. It would be wise to start with lower flex and build up over time, perhaps requiring large firms to invest more in young people to unlock that flex.

Step-by-step reform could limit any unintended consequences.

Focus on completions, not starts

Third, our aim should be getting the right training for people and employers and focus more on apprenticeship completions than starts. The latter is not a particularly useful metric when only around half of starters complete their apprenticeship.

Just increasing the completion rate to the government's target of 67 per cent would mean an extra 20,000 apprenticeship completions per year from the same number of starts.

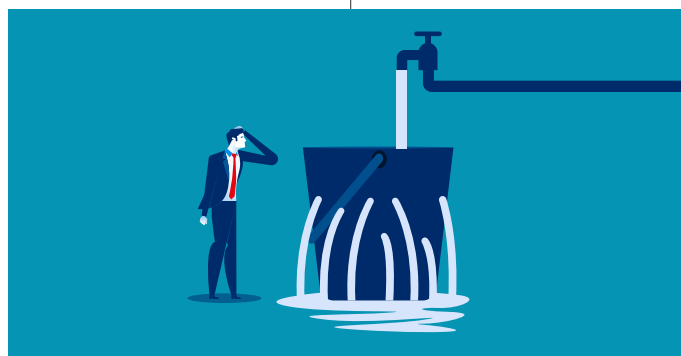
Besides, apprenticeships won't always be the right answer to training needs, as great as they are.

The impact of Labour's policy depends on the rules it sets. We need to know more about those.

In the meantime, estimates based on simplistic maths that don't account for likely employer behaviour don't get us very far. Nor does arguing everything is fine now.

Our ambition must be to increase employer investment in training and reduce the current inequality where graduates are three times more likely to get training than non-graduates.

The apprenticeship levy isn't working. It's time to fix it.



Opinion

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Why we're planning to allocate UCAS Tariff points to apprenticeships


**LINDSAY
CONROY**

 Head of
apprenticeships,
UCAS

As UCAS launches a consultation on its proposal to expand its tariff to more apprenticeships, Lindsay Conroy explains the organisation's rationale

A-levels were once seen as the main route into higher education (HE). Today this couldn't be further from the truth. In 2023, more than 112,000 18-year-olds were accepted into university or college without the traditional three A-levels typically associated with an application to HE.

With different qualifications opening up different pathways, students now face more options than ever before. UCAS's report *Where Next: What influences the choice school leavers make?* found that post-16 choices strongly influence students' futures, highlighting the importance of young people knowing where all pathways lead when making choices in school.

Higher education providers are increasingly recognising the value of the broad range of qualifications and the role this plays in widening access and participation. This positive shift means progression routes are now more interconnected than ever before. This gives individuals access to a variety of pathways that suit their needs and aspirations.

To support this, UCAS allocated tariff points to all regulated Level 3 qualifications in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and SCQF Level 6 apprenticeships in Scotland in 2022. However, to date, Level 3/SCQF Level 6 apprenticeships have not carried

tariff points (although in some cases, the composite qualifications may do).

We're looking to change that. Under new proposals, UCAS is looking to allocate tariff points to Level 3/SCQF Level 6 apprenticeships across the UK, signalling that HE may offer a progression route for these individuals. And we want to hear your views.

The tariff is a simple model that allocates points based on the size and grading structure of a qualification. Over the next four weeks, we will be holding a public engagement exercise with the sector to gauge feedback on our proposed approach to apprenticeships.

Our aims are to signal to apprentices that HE may be an option for them, and to make it easier for them to engage in the process and recognise potential routes.

We recognise that this is not a silver bullet. Universities and colleges are autonomous in the qualifications they accept, and not all universities and colleges use the tariff when making offers. Many use qualifications and grades instead, and many institutions are likely to still use

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) when assessing a candidate's application.

“Our aim is to signal to apprentices that HE may be an option for them”

Of course, not all Level 3 apprentices are considering HE either. But it is a step towards making pathways more visible. Students are at the heart of everything we do, and we want to help those with an apprenticeship understand all available options for their next steps. We will support them in understanding the route to higher education through personalised information, advice and guidance.

It is worth remembering that tariffs are only one aspect of the overall admissions process. Universities and colleges also consider a range of other factors, such as an applicants' knowledge, skills, personal statement and references.

By promoting a greater understanding of these pathways

to universities and colleges, we can support young people in progressing across the full range of post-secondary destinations. While universities and colleges are used to managing differing qualifications when making offers, the allocation of tariff points will help enhance their understanding of this route.

UCAS has an important role in supporting the growing number of individuals interested in apprenticeship opportunities. The next milestone for our apprenticeship service will be the launch of our new CV builder.

Sixty per cent of employers require a CV as part of an apprenticeship application, but many young people find creating one challenging. We also know disadvantaged applicants are initially more interested in apprenticeship opportunities but are less likely to be placed on one – with lack of support and understanding a determining factor.

This new tool will help people apply for apprenticeship vacancies by creating a high-quality CV on our website.

Our four-week public engagement seeking feedback on our proposed model for allocating tariff points to Level 3/SCQF Level 6 apprenticeships is now live. We welcome all sector stakeholder views on the model, with the engagement exercise open until June 20. We will then review all feedback and aim to announce the outcome in the summer.

For more information and to take part, visit [our website](#).



Opinion

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What will it take to deliver an apprenticeship guarantee for learners?

LIZZIE
CROWLEYSkills adviser,
CIPD

Those who say a guarantee can't be delivered in an employer-led system underestimate the appetite for change, explains Lizzie Crowley

Earlier this week we released a report, working with Youth Futures Foundation, calling on the next government to introduce an apprenticeship guarantee for young people up to age 24. It would ensure a Level 2 or Level 3 apprenticeship place is available for every qualified candidate. A guarantee was set out in the 2009 Apprenticeship Act but was later repealed.

One of the main barriers to overcome in implementing an apprenticeship guarantee is ensuring the availability of sufficient opportunities for young people. Critics have previously contended that in an employer-led system this isn't possible, unlike in other parts of the education system where the government can simply increase places.

Yet, while we recognise this critical delivery barrier, our research suggests there is both significant employer support for the introduction of such a guarantee and a willingness to provide additional youth apprenticeship places under one.

Nine in 10 employers (89 per cent) would support an apprenticeship guarantee for young people, and 60 per cent would be able to offer an additional apprenticeship opportunity.

However, it would be unrealistic to rely on the



goodwill of employers alone and further action would be required to unlock more apprenticeship opportunities. In particular, it should target the provision of apprenticeships at small and medium-sized businesses, which are far more likely to provide apprenticeships for young people, as well as provide apprenticeship places at lower levels.

"The next government should shift to demand-led funding"

Our research has highlighted the concerning drop in SME engagement in apprenticeships since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy and other reforms to the system, which have driven the overall collapse in starts as well as a decline in intermediate apprenticeships.

Restoring SME apprenticeship starts to pre-levy levels and unlocking additional opportunities would be required to realise the vision of an

apprenticeship guarantee.

To do this the next government should shift to demand-led youth apprenticeship funding for SMEs, and introduce targeted financial incentives for both small employers and apprenticeship providers to boost youth opportunities.

Alongside enhanced funding and targeted financial incentives there is also a need to build the appetite and capability of small firms to engage in apprenticeships and skills investment more broadly, as well as to help them navigate a complex skills system.

To do this we need enhanced partnerships and business support at a local level. Combined authorities can play a leading role here, while Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) have the potential to be a key actor but require long-term and sustainable funding if they are to make the required impact.

As well as taking action to boost SME engagement, the next government should reform the apprenticeship levy into a flexible skills levy with at least half of the levy money ring-fenced for young

people and the remainder for wider workforce skills needs.

Our research also highlighted that 54 per cent of those that pay into the levy admitted to rebadging existing training schemes as apprenticeships as a way to claim their allowance.

Establishing a more flexible skills levy would remove the incentive for employers to reclassify training as apprenticeships. Additionally, it would enable the provision of accredited training choices that better suit the skill development needs of existing staff.

Finally, as part of a guarantee, there is a need for additional support for those young individuals who are not yet ready to embark on an apprenticeship programme, restoring a crucial initial step on the path to opportunity.

That is why we are calling on the next government to introduce a dedicated pre-apprenticeship programme which should include a weekly bursary, similar to that offered in Wales, to boost participation.

While a youth apprenticeship guarantee would be challenging to deliver, our research demonstrates an appetite and a willingness by employers to rebalance the apprenticeship system towards young people.

We need the next government to match this ambition with the necessary vision and funding to transform the apprenticeship and wider skills system so that it delivers much better outcomes for learners, organisations and the economy.

Opinion

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“Progression, progression, progression” should be Labour’s election slogan


GORDON MARSDEN

Education campaigner, Right to Learn

We need a unified holistic skills strategy across government to meet current and future challenges, says Gordon Marsden

Last week, Right 2 Learn launched *Future Priorities for Lifelong Learning, Skills and Tertiary Education*. It contains 10 recommendations that are backed up by a wide coalition of organisations across FE, skills, HE, careers and more.

With a general election now scheduled for July following local and mayoral elections in which skills, jobs, productivity and regeneration were prominent on the doorstep, policymakers and political parties are scurrying to craft their manifestos.

“Devolution should spur the FE sector to be part of their action locally”

For FE and skills, a workable Lifelong Learning Entitlement and collaboration across Whitehall are critical lifelines.

Back in March 2023, Right 2 Learn anticipated some of the holes in the LLE legislation. In our written evidence to the bill committee, we warned about cutting it off for people over 60. We argued, armed with Learning and Work Institute statistics, that getting the 1.5+ million would-be learners aged 40 to 60+ who had dropped out of economic activity since the pandemic was

a priority.

We also argued, alongside former education secretary David Blunkett, that the Department for Work and Pensions was failing to use its local Job Centres to address these challenges. Mostly, they seemed to pressure clients to take inappropriate or poorly-paid jobs rather than allow universal credit claimants to retrain and reskill.

And along with City & Guilds and others, we gave evidence that young people, NEETs and particularly women were struggling for help and work.

Scorched earth policy

Yet instead of an LLE version two, ministers are clinging to version one like limpets to a rock and over-relying on T-levels and degree apprenticeships as their holy grail.

If there is an overriding theme to our work, it is ‘Progression, progression, progression’. Without it, the pipeline will run dry and life chances for would-be learners of all ages will be lost

Economist John Maynard Keynes famously said “when the

facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”. New skills minister Luke Hall’s answer seems to be to double down with a scorched earth policy by expanding the defunding of BTECs and other qualifications below Level 3.

The FE sector is livid, its calls to delay to September 2025 roundly ignored.

March of the mayors

As it is now, with Rishi Sunak calling a general election in July, the only groups who can plan effectively and get spades in the ground are elected mayors, combined authorities and others whose funding is devolved from Whitehall.

The local elections swept into office a clutch of new Labour mayors covering smaller towns and coastal and rural communities to reinforce the big city mayors.

And if Labour does gain power, Keir Starmer, Rachel Reeves and Angela Rayner will see them as key allies for skills, productivity and growth, with lifelong learning central to upgrading, upskilling and reskilling

towards net zero, housing and regeneration targets.

These devolved initiatives should spur the FE sector to be part of their action locally, reviving an all-ages formula that was whittled away under Tory austerity.

Skills England is a central enabler for Labour’s industrial strategy. But what will it look like? Can we hope to get rid of the vast apprenticeship underspend claw-back? Will we see more collaboration across departments on a meaningful skills strategy? And will we see more devolution, beyond mayoral authorities?

Fit for the future

We’ll soon see. Meanwhile, Labour has to be aware of the future of skills as well as ‘must-dos’ coming into office.

The 2017 Taylor review of modern working practices commissioned by the government envisaged a rapid expansion this decade of the gig economy, fuelled by digital. It suggested millions of small businesses, co-operatives and self-employed people would form a critical mass for skills and productivity.

It was largely ignored, but with the rapid impact of AI (for good or ill), net zero and technical skills, it is looking more prophetic. Backed by a mission from a new Government to empower people of all ages to achieve genuine lifelong learning in a tertiary setting, it should be the goal for UK success by 2030.



Opinion

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Micro-creds can turn volunteering activities into recognised skills



SAM PARRETT

Chief executive, London South East Colleges



PHILIP LE FEUVRE

Chief operating officer, NCFE

Pioneering a way to gain skills accreditation through volunteering could be transformational for communities and learners – especially the most disadvantaged

Micro-credentials are increasingly being recognised as an effective way to meet employers' skills needs. But they offer much more than that, not least in terms of social value.

The idea that learners can build up sets of industry-relevant specialist skills through accredited 'bitesize' modules is pioneering. It provides the flexibility and agility needed in fast-moving sectors where technology is changing all the time and employers need adaptive training models.

But micro-credentials themselves have lots of scope to be adaptable, including in the social impact and enrichment space.

As partners in the campaign Good for Me Good for FE, our organisations are committed to generating social value. We know how deeply embedded colleges are in their local communities and the positive impact they have.

Through its social value 'calculator', Good for Me Good For FE has encouraged volunteering and fundraising activity at colleges across the country. Crucially, it has also helped demonstrate the monetary as well as social value of the additional support FE provides.

The value of volunteering is clear, not only for the people



being supported but for those who give their time and effort. Research shows that helping others is good for mental health and wellbeing; indeed, this was a key driver in the development of Good for Me Good for FE.

But as educationalists, we also know volunteering provides immense value in the development of people's key skills, behaviours and attitudes. These are all key to ensuring people are prepared for the world of work and successful careers.

"Formal recognition for volunteering could be hugely valuable"

The question is how we can better recognise and attach value to the skills developed through such activity so that volunteers can take them forward into the workplace.

We think the answer lies in micro-credentials. A first for the sector, this will involve exploring

the creation of a suite of credentials linked to the skills that come from volunteering activity such as teamwork, collaboration and communication.

The potential benefits are far-reaching, not least because it could give us something tangible to measure alongside social value. We know that 'what gets measured gets done', so additional quantitative indicators strengthen our evidence base as to the impact this work is having.

Enrichment is a fundamental aspect of FE provision. Providing opportunities for students to gain recognition for their contributions and the skills they have developed while undertaking activities to support others is a natural extension of this.

This includes work experience, which we know is hugely beneficial. With high-quality placements so hard to come by, volunteering could play a much greater role – particularly if universally recognised credentials were attached.

For college students (and indeed staff), demonstrating skills beyond academic qualifications

is essential in today's competitive world. For those from disadvantaged backgrounds this can be difficult to achieve – as so many activities come at a cost.

Gaining formal recognition for volunteering activities could be hugely valuable, reflecting a much wider skill set as well as commitment and passion for a cause.

Together, we are committed to driving the development of micro-credentials. This includes a pilot project involving our two organisations, with plans to deliver 1,000 accreditations.

But to do this effectively, we need to create a robust and credible framework for these bitesize credentials.

Volunteering activities are extremely varied. They comprise a broad range of learning outcomes, and ensuring consistency and validity will be a key challenge.

We want to work in partnership with colleges to help us build an innovative framework. This must accurately assess and demonstrate achievement in relation to essential skills such as teamwork and communication, which are at the heart of volunteering.

We are excited about this work, which is the next step in our Good for Me Good for FE journey. It will harness the social impact and value that is already being generated in communities while strengthening the skills and qualifications of the people working hard to support others.

If your college is interested in contributing to the development work, we would love to hear from you.

Bulletin

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK



Gary Buxton

Chair, Hopwood
Hall College and
University Centre

Start date: July 2024

Concurrent Job: Coaching psychologist

Interesting fact: With a special interest in improving outcomes for young people, Gary established the Young Advisors Charity in 2007 and grew the organisation to employ over 1,500 people nationwide

Movers & Shakers

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



Stuart Liversedge

Head of Operations
and Customer
Relationships,
Active IQ

Start date: May 2024

Previous Job: Business Development Manager, Active IQ

Interesting fact: Stuart's career in health and fitness spans two decades. He's a passionate advocate for health and fitness, participating in charity runs for MIND and the Stroke Association and staying active as an amateur footballer

If you want to let us know of any new faces at the top of your college, training provider or awarding organisation please let us know by emailing news@feweek.co.uk

Are you ready to move?

Check out the top roles in
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