

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Further Education and Skills](#), HC 666

Tuesday 25 March 2025

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Darren Paffey; Mark Sowards; Caroline Voaden.

Questions 1 - 29

Witnesses

I: Alice Gardner, Chief Executive, Edge Foundation; Darren Hankey, Principal and CEO of Hartlepool FE College, ASCL; Robert Nitsch CBE, Chief Executive, Federation of Awarding Bodies; David Robinson, Director of Post 16 and Skills, Education Policy Institute.

II: Jo Grady, General Secretary, University and College Union; David Hughes CBE, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges; Imran Tahir, Research Economist, Institute for Fiscal Studies; Bill Watkin CBE, Chief Executive, Sixth Form Colleges Association.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alice Gardner, Darren Hankey, Robert Nitsch and David Robinson.

Chair: Welcome, members and witnesses, to our public oral evidence session. This is the Education Committee's first oral evidence session in our inquiry on further education and skills. Can I first invite our witnesses to introduce themselves, perhaps starting with Robert at the end there?

Robert Nitsch: Good morning. I am the chief executive of the Federation of Awarding Bodies, the trade body for organisations that write and assess qualifications in FE and skills. I am also the chair at the City of Portsmouth College and was the chief operating officer and delivery director at IfATE until August of last year.

Darren Hankey: Good morning, everybody. I am the principal and chief executive of Hartlepool College of Further Education in the wonderful north-east. It is my 30th year in further education and my 12th year as college principal, and I am probably the only college principal who resat GCSE maths as part of their education journey. Thank you for the invite.



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Alice Gardner: Hello. I am the chief executive of the Edge Foundation, an independent foundation that is interested in young people's journeys from 11 through to 24. Our particular focus is ensuring that young people have access to a broad and balanced curriculum and a feel of what it is like to work in the real world. Our research and policy focus largely on the aspects between 11 and 19. We are trying to encourage the education system to feel like it can challenge the status quo.

David Robinson: Good morning, everyone. I am the director of vulnerable learners and post 16 at the Education Policy Institute, an independent research organisation.

Q1 **Chair:** I will begin our questioning this morning. The written evidence that our Committee has received describes the range of post-16 qualifications as, "Narrow, rigid and failing to accommodate the diverse learning needs of all students." What is your assessment of the range of post-16 qualifications currently on offer and how could it be improved? I might start with Robert, as your member organisation is the awarding body for those qualifications.

Robert Nitsch: The range is incredibly important, and the members would advocate for a broad-based, purpose-driven offer. We are not doing as well on the broad base or the purpose-driven offer, and it would have been helpful if that had come through a bit more strongly in the curriculum and assessment review and where it is planning to look. We would be advocating for those things but also not leaving behind the idea of quality, and actually we need to make sure that breadth does not come at the cost of just introducing low-quality qualifications.

Darren Hankey: On a positive note, we have a clear qualification framework in England, going from entry level all the way up to master's degree level and PhD. Some aspects of that—the so-called academic route—are very clear; if someone wants to be a doctor or a vet, it is very clear to that young person, their parents, carers, and so on, what they need to do in terms of GCSEs, A-levels and university.

When it comes to vocational and technical education, to echo what Rob said, we have a very broad range of qualifications there. One difference between vocational and technical education compared with the more academic route is that we tend to call them by their awarding organisation, name and number. For those in the system, it makes sense and is quite clear, but for those outside the system—young people coming through, adults returning, parents, carers and employers—it probably lacks a little clarity.

As I said, I have been in the sector for 30 years this year. There has been constant tinkering in those 30 years; we have had an alphabet soup of different qualifications. Even just recently, there have been changes at level 3 with a direction of travel to A-levels, T-levels and apprenticeships. Shortly after that, we had the announcement of the Advanced British Standard and had a change of Government who announced a rapid



review that probably could have been a little quicker. We went into this academic year not really knowing what we were going to deliver next academic year, and that was a difficult message to share with next year's students, their parents, carers, and adults. We also have the curriculum and assessment review, so there is an opportunity there to be a little clearer.

Again, when it comes to adult education, devolution has had a bit of an impact as well; Hartlepool is in the Tees Valley but we serve people in County Durham, which is a different area when it comes to devolution, and they both have different priorities and entitlements, which can be quite confusing.

Alice Gardner: The landscape can look quite confusing to a young person post-16, and some of that is a responsibility pre-16, so it is really difficult to look at it in isolation. It is quite clear that young people are starting to think about where their lives are going to take them. Really young people—sometimes nine and 10 years old—are disregarding career paths, and then all the way through to 16, we have quite a narrow curriculum that does not encourage young people to really understand the routes and pathways that might be available to them later.

If we are interested in them taking a pathway that is more vocational or technical post-16, how are they going to know and understand what those choices look like if the curriculum pre-16 is very tight and does not allow the flexibility to be studying those sorts of subjects that might set them up post-16? I am thinking about things like design and technology, which we have seen a rapid decline of at GCSE, which engenders those skills around problem-solving, resilience and teamwork—all the things we hear employers talking about all the time.

The landscape looks pretty confusing. It is also not a one-stop shop. Once you get to post-16, you do not have that same opportunity at 18 just to use a UCAS system to be able to find or source an apprenticeship. You have to either be quite reliant on the teaching staff or your parents or be really independent and get out there and do it yourself, but that is not easy. Worryingly, those apprenticeships that are coming from the lower socioeconomic backgrounds struggle to get support on their applications at all when they are making apprenticeship applications, which is a worry because those are the ones that need the most support to make sure they are making good choices.

David Robinson: Building on what my colleagues here have already said, we have a clear distinction between academic pathways—where we have a single recognisable brand—versus technical and vocational qualifications, where we have many awarding bodies and different sizes of qualifications. In fact, there are three times as many qualifications within each subject area for vocational qualifications compared with academic qualifications.



This complexity works against those who need the most support at the post-16 transition. We know that disadvantaged learners taking lower-level qualifications tend to be less well-informed about their options at this transition, and this can often result in disadvantaged learners undermatching into qualifications. They tend to take qualifications where their peers are less able than them on average and qualifications that, on average, lead to less well-earning careers. That complexity for disadvantaged and young people taking lower-level qualifications can work against those who need the most support. The way forward here is actually to continue to simplify the qualification market post-16, particularly in the technical and vocational area.

Q2 Chair: I want to push a little on that question. You have articulated the issue very clearly, which is an imbalance between the clarity for the academic region, the communication that students get around that, and then the wild west of how you navigate the range of vocational pathways. My question is: are there obvious interventions that could make the range of pathways clearer?

David, you have mentioned essentially slimming down the number of routes, but we have also heard evidence on the need for a very broad basis of qualifications and a diverse range of options. I am interested in whether there are interventions that could be delivered that would make that landscape more straightforward to navigate and better supported for students who are pursuing a vocational pathway.

Darren Hankey: Picking up on David's point, there are a number of awarding organisations that offer GCSE English and A-level English, probably more so than health and social care in the vocational and technical sphere, but again, we just know it as GCSE English and A-level English, whereas in the vocational and technical sphere, it is City & Guilds, Pearson, BTEC, or whatever it may be.

We might touch on T-levels a little later, but I quite like the intent of T-levels because it brings all those under just the one banner of calling it a T-level. That is one particular thing that probably could be pursued in terms of having more of a strategic and coherent approach and a clearer purpose of what we want from post-16 education, not just for 16, 17 and 18-year-olds but for adults and apprenticeships as well.

David Robinson: For GCSEs, we have a single brand there. We have multiple awarding bodies, but those qualifications are quite carefully standardised in terms of assessment and so on. For T-levels, we have a franchise model where we have one awarding body for each subject area. We could use either of those models for smaller level 3 qualifications. Taking the overall approach of T-levels and reducing the complexity either in terms of the number of awarding bodies or the ranges of types of qualifications would be a significant step forward.

Robert Nitsch: The first thing is we need to be really careful that we do not balance the technical, vocational, further education offer purely



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against academic qualifications; we need to see them for what they are and what they do, and there is a perception that we need to adjust there.

In terms of what we could do materialistically to help, it would be helping students to have a more informed choice. Where we see informed choice, we see better take-up and students that stick with the course that they are doing, and that is something, again, that the curriculum and assessment review could look at. This is not career advice; this is education advice, and the two are distinct. There is certainly a case for more clarity about the sense of purpose, what the outcomes of technical education are, where they land, and how they are branded and grouped together.

The final two points I would make is that linking key stage 4 and FE more effectively is critical. When you look at a catering GCSE, that is not based on the same standards that are used to support FE-based qualifications, such as apprenticeships. That is just an example of the discontinuity as people travel through their education journey, and you just bump into skills and vocational training at 16; we do not smooth the pathway in.

The final point I would make is that we also need to think about the here and now. There is a moratorium on new qualifications and reviews of qualifications and we have to think about how we deal with that and move on from that situation. So there is a longer-term issue of how we shape it, but there is also a short-term issue that it is affecting students today.

Alice Gardner: There are some actions we could take quite quickly and easily that would really help, especially from the young person's learner journey. One would be to monitor the compliance of the Baker clause to ensure that young people are understanding and hearing from alternative institutions about what could be next post-16 so they are able to make good decisions.

Another action would be rewarding strong partnerships between FE and HE and mayoral areas and devolved regions that are doing things that are really neat and working in their regions. We could also make more use of the IfATE occupational maps, which allow young people to really understand where this qualification they are looking at is going to take them, what that looks like and the journey through that. We talk about careers advice and guidance all the time, but unless that is really strong and we start talking about that earlier, we are shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted.

I also mentioned earlier the one-stop shop in terms of having a place where young people can go that feels the same as when you are on the academic route so that you have one place to go where you understand how to find the opportunities and how to apply. Those could be done reasonably easily and quickly.

Q3 **Mrs Brackenridge:** In December last year, the Government announced



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that they would retain a number of level 3 qualifications until 2027 that were previously marked for being defunded, including dozens of BTECs. What impact will this delayed defunding have on the sector, and in your view, should these qualifications be retained beyond 2027? I will start with David.

David Robinson: It is important that we retain alternatives to T-levels. As I have spoken about with the Committee here before, T-levels are very large, challenging qualifications. They have good outcomes associated with them; those who succeed in a T-level are more likely to progress to higher technical qualifications, apprenticeships, and so on, but they are large and challenging. If we give young people a binary choice between T-levels and A-levels on one side and being pushed down to lower-level qualifications on the other, many more young people will end up not achieving a level 3, which we know is associated with good outcomes for young people.

It is important that we maintain a range of smaller qualifications. Young people have spiky profiles and want to take a smaller level 3 qualification in one area and a level 2 qualification in another subject area or a mix of academic and technical qualifications. It is important that we maintain that mix, so I would not want to defund too many alternatives to T-levels.

Alice Gardner: David makes some very good points there. It is really important that there are alternatives. T-levels are the equivalent of three A-levels; they are pretty chunky and do not suit all learners. We already know that a number of institutions are doing that entry level in—that year of prep—to see if they can get students up to standard.

It is also important to think about where young people go when they take that range of qualifications. A lot of people who take BTECs are still going to university, and retention at university is good for a large majority of BTEC students. As David said, it is also important to have that flexibility, and it appeals to that side of me that thinks that a baccalaureate style teaching from 16 through to 18 or 19 really supports that: the opportunity to mix and match between the tracks. Rather than talking about a parity of esteem between academic and technical and vocational, it is actually the opportunity for all young people—whatever their backgrounds or aspirations—to mix and match those qualifications to give them a suite that really helps them be prepared for the world of work.

Interestingly, we did some polling last year, and 78% of the 1,000 who were polled believed that that kind of mix-and-match option was a really good way of preparing young people for the world of work, so there is something in there.

Mrs Brackenridge: Darren, what is your experience in terms of the impact on staff, students and parents?



Darren Hankey: The decision was welcome. From an operational point of view, I just wish it was a little quicker because we found out just before Christmas. As I said, when we started this academic year, we knew what the curriculum was. There was an immediate pause when the current Government came in, but then we did not get the results of that rapid review until later in the year. For the next academic year, we were having open days, colleges up and down the country were trying to inform current year 11 students and their parents or carers of what the options were, and obviously we went into that process a little blind.

Probably just to echo what everyone else has said, these types of qualifications are essential. If we go with A-levels, T-levels and apprenticeships, that will cut off a lot of opportunities for lots of young people. As I said before, I like the intent behind T-levels, but the take-up and dropouts have been variable. Arguably, the most successful one is in early years, but that had a successful predecessor; those qualifications had a long, well-established track record of getting young people into placements, which the T-level has done.

The industry placements are a concern with healthcare across most colleges. Let me just give a bit more of an example. In the five FE colleges of Tees Valley—Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Stockton, Redcar and Darlington—we probably have about 500 young people doing level 3, non-T-level engineering qualifications. That is aerospace engineering, automotive engineering, civil engineering, electrical, mechanical, and mechatronics. There is no way that we would be able to find 500 placements for those students if we went down the A-level, T-level or apprenticeship route. No way in this world.

The question is what happens to those young people in places like the Tees Valley? It is a wonderful part of the country and has lots of bright spots, but the economy is probably not as rich and buoyant to support the placement. From my point of view, as I said, I like the intent behind T-levels and A-levels are well established, but we do need another alternative.

Robert Nitsch: Our members that deliver T-levels have made a huge investment in them, the return from which has nowhere near been realised. But the vision of it being the pre-eminent offer at level 3 in the technical space is simply not supported by the number of students who are taking it up, which is 3% of the population.

We would advocate for a broader offer that caters across the ability range, for us to really think about the format, flexibility and purpose of T-levels and perhaps walk away or have more flexibility in a model. Currently, it is a one model fits all and it is astonishing to think that you could have a single education model that works across the whole breadth of our economy. We would like to see more flexibility and agility built into the T-level model to help it thrive alongside a broader offer.

Q4 **Mrs Brackenridge:** To the whole panel again, we have seen evidence



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that post-16 vocational options are often not presented to students on an equal footing with academic choices such as A-levels. How can the parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways be achieved? I will start again with David.

David Robinson: I sometimes worry that parity of esteem is a distraction. Even in countries with very well-developed technical vocational systems, around the same proportion of adults would recommend vocational pathways for young people as in the UK. I would rather that we focus on things like parity of inputs, and we know that those are not equal across academic and technical pathways. We have already made some moves in recent years as far as this is concerned. It used to be the case that technical qualifications were funded less than academic qualifications, despite the fact they have higher delivery costs. That has been improved in recent years.

But as I said, we still have other inequalities across those pathways. We have talked about the complexity of the pathways and the difficulties that creates for young people. We also know that academic pathways are often taught in school sixth forms, and technical vocational pathways are more often than not taught in further education colleges, where pay is on average 18% lower. That has a direct impact on recruitment and retention in those sectors, so vacancy rates in the FE sector are around 10 times lower than those in the school sector. I would rather we focus on parity of inputs. We may get closer to parity of esteem if we address some of those things, but parity of esteem on its own can be a distraction.

Alice Gardner: David makes a very good point there. We need to start seeing these qualifications as things that actually are enablers for all because they very often engender all the skills that employers are looking for. It does not matter if you are thinking of studying French at university; you still need to know how to be able to work in a team, and you still need resilience and all the skills that are going to prepare you for the world of work.

Rather than thinking about these being for these people and these being for those people, it is that mix and match and that landscape of, actually, these subjects are good for all, so that we stop defining them as, "Those are for the less able," or, "Those are for the people who are in socially and economically deprived areas," and, "These are for the leafy areas that are going to do really well." If we stop thinking about those subjects in those terms, that will really help.

I probably sound like a broken record, but it all happens earlier. We really need to start talking about this when young people are 11 or even younger, thinking about what is going to happen as they move through school. School is a great place to be able to enjoy education and develop a love of learning; this is all marvellous, but it really matters that young people have an idea of what the purpose of education is and how they



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get a good job that is meaningful for them, that is going to embed them in their community and gives them a stake in society.

If we do not start talking about that earlier, by the time they get to 16, they are really confused about what the options are. If you are going on an academic route, that is much easier, but if you are thinking about going down the technical route, you may never have studied a technical subject. You may never have been in a work environment or done a work placement. We need to roll it all back and start really early so that we are preparing young people for those choices and it is not a cliff edge when they get to 16.

Darren Hankey: I pick up on the points of a parity of esteem there, and obviously I have mentioned the so-called academic route, because in some respects I do not really get it. To be a successful engineer, you really need a good knowledge of physics and maths; to work in the healthcare sector, you need a good knowledge of biology and physiology. Even some courses that I do not necessarily agree with but are often much derided, such as hair and beauty, where you need the anatomy and physiology of the hand and the head, and dermatology and that type of stuff. So to be successful in a vocational, technical area, you need a good academic underpinning anyway. Going back to the previous conversation, we could probably call all qualifications at levels 2 and 3 the same thing because that would do away with the parity.

Building on what Alice said, another aspect—certainly a case in Hartlepool and the Tees Valley in the north-east—is to look at what money you can earn. If you can lay a thousand bricks a day accurately, you are earning £50,000 to £60,000, and similarly if you are an electrician. We have seen jobs recently for pipefitters for £100,000, so that has been a real boon for those of us who offer vocational and technical qualifications because the labour market is there and is crying out for people. We have an ageing workforce in the north-east, and lots of the firms who engage with colleges are looking for young people and adults returning to try to fill the gaps that they have in an ageing workforce.

Similarly, we are seeing it a little now where going to university is probably not the golden ticket that it was for myself and other people on the panel when we went a few years ago—or many years ago, I should say in my case. There is lots of data coming through now that taking a vocational or technical qualification—especially at a higher level, HNC and HND, which are very popular in the north-east as well as other areas across the country—can actually provide a better economic return than the more academic route.

Robert Nitsch: I would agree with my colleagues. It is a perception rooted in the academic route, and there seems to be a preconceived idea that non-academic just needs to catch up. In terms of how we might think about that, I completely agree that there should be a greater focus on a sense of purpose in education and what the outcomes are: rather



than education for education's purpose, education for a purpose. That might help motivate more people to stay in education and see it as an outcome-based activity.

I definitely think the Baker clause is not working; it is not sufficient. Where we see it applied, it seems to work reasonably well; 16% more apprenticeships in school settings have actually pushed that, so we really need to think about the Baker clause and how that is applied.

I would certainly agree that we need to think about it earlier in schools, but I would also think about the technical routes into teaching. Teaching remains a very degree-focused profession—I am not disagreeing with that at all—but you do not need to go to university to acquire a degree, as we see in degree apprenticeships. When we think about how we condition the system to better support it, it is not just what is done in schools; it is the type of people who are the mentors, the leaders, and who are setting the examples in those schools as well. It needs to be a cultural change rather than something a bit more fragile, so to speak.

Q5 **Jess Asato:** For some post-16 students with special educational needs or disabilities, learning how to live independent, well-connected lives is as important as preparing for employment. What specific actions should the Government take to ensure post-16 education is inclusive and meets the needs of all learners and trainees? I will start with Darren.

Darren Hankey: Further education is probably the most inclusive sector that we have out of primary, secondary and higher education. It is a wonderful and diverse sector in terms of the levels, from entry level all the way up through to master's degree, which lots of colleges offer, and there are lots of different types of colleges. We serve students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Certainly with my college we have seen more and more students come through with an EHCP over the last few years. We and all colleges do a wonderful job in supporting those learners.

There is an issue with some learners who have yet to have a diagnosis, and we have seen this in the school system; it is certainly the case in further education where some learners present as having some kind of need but have no diagnosis to back that up. That then puts pressure on the college because obviously for those who do have a plan, there is a bit of extra support there to make sure that those learners get the support they need to be successful within the further education setting, but those who do not have a diagnosis do not have that support and we just have to rely on the standard investment that comes in.

Just on investment, David might mention that his organisation has done some research; the Institute for Fiscal Studies highlights that current investment to 16, 17 and 18-year-olds is 10% less now in 2024-25 than it was back in 2010. So in 15 years, we have gone backwards in investment. What that means in real terms—again, it is particularly important for those with SEND but for all learners—is that we get paid to



deliver a programme of study for 580 hours. That is about two thirds of what the average OECD young person will get, and in some high-performing OECD countries—your Germanys, Singapores and Scandinavian countries—that will be about half what they get. In many respects, we are letting young people down, not only those with SEND but all young people.

Obviously, for those who come through who do not have a diagnosis, we then have to try to support them out of that investment that we have, which is quite difficult. The free school meals investment that we get to help feed a growing teenager is about £2.53, and then those whose child benefit, universal credit and other support they might get are not going up in line with inflation. So there is a lot of demand and pressure on colleges to support those students—not only those with EHCPs but also those who do not have them—to try to get them where they want to get to.

Going back to my previous point, it is a wonderful, vibrant sector. Students come there and they want to learn, develop, improve and prepare themselves for the next steps, and colleges do a good job of that despite the problems that we face in terms of investment.

Alice Gardner: We have covered a couple of points that are quite relevant here around choice and thinking about subjects like BTECs and how you can pull subjects together to offer really good choices for SEND students. That is another reason I would not want to have a dichotomy of A-levels and T-levels because it does not offer that breadth that those young people might thrive on.

We also need to think about teaching because the more vibrant, applied and relevant the teaching is, the easier it is for all young people to engage. That is the interesting thing about SEND: there are specialist interventions that really help those young people, but a lot of those interventions would actually help the whole young person population. Being able to have learning that feels real and takes them on to the idea of what they will do in the workplace makes that learning come alive and makes them feel invested in what they are doing.

That is not just good for those students who have SEND but for the whole population. It is also good for lecturers and teachers because once you are engaging your students and teaching in that way, which initially takes quite a lot of effort to pull together, it really helps with their concentration. It means that you have less issues around school refusers if they feel that when they go to school, this is a place for them, that is invested in them, and that there is a product at the end of it for them, rather than something they have to do because, "This is what you do between 9 am and 3 pm because what else do you do?" It is trying to give that stake. The Edge Foundation is not a specialist in the area of SEND, so that is probably the end of my piece on that.



David Robinson: What we know about students with SEND on EHCPs in the 16 to 18 phase is that by the end of that phase, they are, on average, the equivalent of seven A-level grades behind their non-SEND peers. For those who were on SEND support previously, they are around four grades behind by the end of the phase.

I do not think we fully understand what happens for students with SEND in this phase. There is a bit of a dearth of research and good evidence on the drivers for some of those gaps, and it is certainly something we at EPI are keen to do more research on to understand some drivers there. Some of what Alice has mentioned in terms of a diversity of different kinds of pathways for young people, and critically, the ability for young people to change pathways as they progress through their post-16 education is really important. I do not have too much more to add on SEND, but there is a big evidence gap there that needs filling.

Robert Nitsch: My colleagues have outlined how the FE and skills model potentially fits this community extremely well, and people who design this type of qualification are fully aware of that. There are two additional points I would make. The first is that we need to be really careful not to confuse quality or ability with people who might be stigmatised as being SEND, and in the way that we talk about and discuss it, there is an unhelpful merging and an atmosphere that may well exist that we need to think really carefully about. Trying to make sure we are clear about what we are talking about is part of a national conversation we need to straighten out.

The second thing is the flexibility that is available with valid forms of assessment. If you look at what IfATE recognises, it recognised 13 forms of assessment, much more than just exams. I do not think we are adventurous enough in exploring the other forms of assessment that may suit individuals who are stigmatised as being SEND better. Do we have the balance right between reliability and validity of the assessment and where do we wish that line to be drawn? We should be looking at that extremely carefully.

Q6 **Jess Asato:** That is interesting because my next question was going to be about the changes needed to be made to the assessment system to make it more inclusive. How would you say that that is best achieved?

Robert Nitsch: It is by embracing wider forms of assessment and thinking carefully about how they are compared. If you look at our approach to assessment, we have tried to benchmark everything against exams, or we are moving to that model; you can see that come through in T-levels and the extent of the assessment that sits within a T-level programme.

We should be putting much more emphasis on comparing different forms of assessment and how something that is more practical can be benchmarked so we are able to value people between different forms of assessment rather than think that we are heading for reliability and



therefore the purest exam model is a much better way of tackling this. That links back to some research that was being talked about a few minutes ago.

Q7 Jess Asato: Darren, on this issue of assessment, we know that it has been criticised for not accommodating the needs and abilities of all students, including neurodivergent learners. What changes would you like to see in the system?

Darren Hankey: I agree with Rob. There is an overemphasis on exams, and that is particularly the case in year 11. I had a daughter go through year 11 last year, and she had 27 exams to get through the GCSEs she did. Obviously, in further education, certainly in practical areas, there are wider forms, and as other people have said, that can then make people flourish who do not necessarily flourish in the exam situation.

We have new technologies now. We looked to pilot something called comparative judgment with No More Marking, run by a wonderful lady called Daisy Christodoulou. There are those new forms and new bits of technology that could be used to vary it up a bit. I appreciate why exams are lauded; they are probably the best of the bad bunch in terms of reliability, validity and being non-discriminatory, but if we just put all our eggs in the exams basket, we are missing out on the talents that lots of people have.

Q8 Darren Paffey: Good morning. You will know that the curriculum and assessment review's interim report was published last week, and in it, T-levels were described as the gold standard of vocational qualifications. I would be interested to hear if you share that view and what your assessment of T-levels is.

Robert Nitsch: It is very dangerous to stigmatise anything as the gold standard; any qualification will have advantages and disadvantages. T-levels have a particular function. Our focus should be on how we can make them work better. The original Richard review was an intervention at levels 2 and 3, rather than just level 3, so effectively, rather than having had an educational intervention, we have invented a new qualification at level 3.

The transition programme is not working that well either, so that needs some real focus. Part of making it work is thinking about the infrastructure or the foundations on which it sits, rather than just viewing it as a qualification itself. Having said that, there are some really good things in the qualification, particularly the industrial placement, and I would draw a distinction between an industrial placement and work experience, and us understanding that and seeing what it has brought to the marketplace.

Finally, I will just take you back to my earlier observation that the model that we are applying to T-levels is very rigid at the moment, and it is just a leap of faith to expect that to work across the whole of the economy—



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so thinking more about the purpose, where a T-level leads you and how it progresses.

Just picking up on Darren's earlier point: yes, education and childcare does work better than any other T-level. What is remarkable about it is that when we developed that T-level, we thought that it would help teaching assistants rather than teachers themselves, and it has now become a major route into primary education. So it also demonstrates that we are finding our way with these qualifications, and there is an element of going with the grain, working with it and thinking about how we can optimise what it is telling us about the type of people who it attracts and where they go.

Darren Hankey: I would probably echo what I said before; I probably personally would not describe it as a gold standard, but I liked the intent behind it when it first came out, and again, that parity of esteem with T-levels. As I alluded to before, most vocational and technical qualifications are named after the awarding organisation—some with names, some with numbers, some with brand names—and that can create a bit of confusion, so it took that away.

As I said before, take-up has been variable. It is interesting that we have mentioned early years again; that is the most successful one, but again there has been an unintended consequence there with its predecessor qualification. Some people did go into teaching in primary school and follow that route; a vast majority went into working in nurseries with preschool. Now what we are finding—it is national rather than just a thing in the north-east—is that the vast majority want to go into primary school and not nurseries, and there is a bit of a workforce development issue in that sector.

The industrial placements, again, have good intent, but I have said before that some parts of the economy will struggle, such as the north-east, north-west, midlands, and south-west. If that stays as is, what happens to those young people who live in an area where they cannot access a placement? There was a bit of research from the CIPD a few years ago; it was post covid, so that might have had an impact, but employer awareness and employers' willingness to engage is probably not where we want it to be.

Again, we have touched on assessment in this session. Obviously, there is stuff linked to the industrial placement, but by and large, it is exam-focused, so it is missing out on other forms of assessment as well. To echo Rob's point, we just need a clear strategy, purpose and a bit of coherence to the post-16 landscaping, including adult education.

Alice Gardner: We need to acknowledge where the challenges are if we want T-levels to be really successful, and if we paper over the cracks, we are doing a disservice to what could be a really useful pathway for young people. Robert and Darren have talked about some of those challenges. The dropout rates are still quite high. Young people are still slightly



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unsure when they end up on a T-level how they got there; they have not necessarily made a highly structured decision about that.

Industry placements are great. Why would you not want to have that kind of engagement with employers? The challenge is—with the youth guarantee and apprenticeships as well—we are asking employers to do an awful lot. They are not always clear what those demands are, and if you are like Darren and have 500 engineers, that suddenly looks like a huge amount of employers you have to pull out of a proverbial hat. T-levels being so much chunkier—the equivalent of three A-levels—do not give any opportunity to study alongside, so you cannot mix and match like you can with A-levels and BTECs, where you can have that nice element of perhaps doing a maths A-level with a BTEC in engineering.

We did a qualitative piece of research before Christmas, interviewing 200 young people, and there were quite mixed feelings about T-levels. Most were reasonably encouraging and really appreciated it was a new qualification, so they were really cutting it some slack, “We know it’s new and that the teaching materials might not be as good as some other subjects that are well established because we know the teachers are getting to grips with this.” But it feels like it is very much in that guinea pig phase and I get worried about young people being the guinea pigs. We cannot really afford to let any young person go through any qualification without being absolutely clear what the aims and objectives are and what they will get at the end of it.

We have to have a really grown-up conversation about the bits of T-levels that are really good and the bits that are seriously requiring some challenging interventions so that we have a qualification that people are proud to have taken and employers will acknowledge. We also know that a number of universities are not taking T-levels, so a lot of T-level students think they will probably go on to university, but a third of the Russell Group are not accepting them. We have to be really clear with young people on what their options are and whether that is the right option for them. So gold standard, not yet, but with a serious, grown-up approach, they could be another additional element to the landscape.

David Robinson: I would agree: I do not think they are necessarily the gold standard, although they are a good qualification. We have talked about the increased size of the qualification, the industry placement and the simplification of choices for young people all being positive steps. I have talked before about how young people who complete T-levels are more likely to progress to high technical qualifications—part of the missing middle that we have been looking to build for many years now. So they have an important part to play in the ecosystem.

Scalability is my concern. The size and challenge of T-levels means that they are not for all students, plus of course there is the slight narrowness of them. Our research showed that retention was an issue for some students, with students of T-levels being 20% less likely to complete than



students doing similar-sized alternative qualifications. Disadvantaged students are particularly more likely to drop out of T-levels. There are clearly still challenges; they are not for all.

What I would add is that while T-levels are a good qualification within a wider ecosystem, the transition programme is definitely not gold standard, with only around 8% of those on the transition programme transitioning to T-levels, and of those that do, around a quarter drop out in the first year. So there is clearly still a lot of work to be done on the transition programme.

Q9 **Darren Paffey:** A number of you have raised issues thinking about the student experience, and we know that generally they are less satisfied and more likely to drop out than peers doing other qualifications. Some things that have been cited as factors of that are lack of familiarity with the qualification and a misunderstanding of its purpose. I will not necessarily ask you all to comment on this just because of time, but if any of you have one suggestion that would improve the appeal and the recognition of T-levels, speak now or forever hold your peace.

Darren Hankey: I like the industrial experience, but if that could be done in other ways—volunteering, social action, that type of work—so they can get some of those generic so-called softer skills, that would be great, and a bit more of a mix of assessment as well.

Robert Nitsch: I would say that we need to get the market to want it more. It is for an outcome, so if universities are not accepting a Government-sponsored, high-quality qualification, what is going on there? Is the qualification wrong? Why should it be acceptable in some institutions but not in others? So really working on the benefits that T-level students bring, and the demand signal is important.

I would say the success of T-levels has been rooted in two things. First is that whenever you meet a T-Level student, they are really enjoying their course of education. I get that people drop out, but actually they are brilliant advocates for it, as are the people who teach them.

Secondly, there has been an element of political consensus that they are a good thing to be doing, and that has helped sustain the programme through what has been quite a difficult birth. So maintaining that but also thinking about actually how we make sure that people who have done these qualifications are welcome in all scenarios is something that we need to really think about.

Alice Gardner: Maybe the other point is that they have been pretty costly: £1.75 billion so far. For this to be successful, it cannot just be about throwing more money at it; we have to think about those structural elements that are not quite working at the moment. If we get those right, they will find their place in the landscape as part of it, but there needs to be some major structural changes.



Darren Paffey: I know a number of you made suggestions in your answers to the first question, so that is good to have those on record as well.

Chair: I will go to Mark. Can I encourage you at this point in the agenda to be as succinct as you can in your answers just because we still want to hear from you on a number of different topics and we are going to be struggling with the time? We have to get to the next panel as well.

Q10 **Mark Swards:** I will focus right down then on industry placements and working with the industry. You all know how important it is that the industry placements feature in T-levels, and yet this Committee has heard evidence previously—Ofsted has also said—that the industry is not working as closely as it could be in the design and implementation of T-levels. Starting with Robert—who talked about this briefly earlier—do you agree and how would you improve it?

Robert Nitsch: Employers are deeply involved in the commissioning of T-levels, and unlike other qualifications we are required to engage with employers throughout the process, as opposed to presenting a qualification at the end of a development process and ask employers to approve it. If you look at the way that IfATE has engaged with awarding organisations, it has hugely been about the employer engagement, so I would take issue with the evidence that you have been presented.

Mark Swards: So you think that it is engaged enough in designing the T-levels?

Robert Nitsch: Absolutely. Over 100 employers are being consulted, and you have to present a list of the employers that you are consulting to IfATE, which scrutinises it. It has been a major issue that was being taken up with awarding organisations. There is more employer engagement on T-levels than any other qualification. I am astonished that somebody can think otherwise.

Darren Hankey: Let me just take it away from T-levels a bit to wider skills policy. As I said, I am 30 years in this year, and what I have seen in that time—it probably gets to the kernel of the problem for me—is that policymakers tend to focus on the supply of skills and then tinker with things, such as different types of qualifications, as we have heard about today. Again, there has been an alphabet soup of qualifications in the vocational sphere over 30 years.

We tend to tinker with targets; I remember there were 50% of people going to higher education and 3 million apprentices not too long ago. There is a current target—it might have been with the previous Government—of so many prisoners getting apprenticeships. Again, we keep having these targets and missing them. We tinker with qualifications, targets and structures. We have UTCs, we have had national colleges, different iterations, and the area review.



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I understand why policymakers tinker with those things—because they are easy to tinker with—but the kernel of the problem we have in this country is not so much supply but demand for skills: the utilisation of and investment in skills. You will probably hear from David Hughes of the Association of Colleges that nearly 90% of FE colleges are good or better when it comes to Ofsted. As a principal of the college, I can always do better. Sorry, I am waffling.

Just to underline the demand for skills: one in five firms takes on an apprentice in this country. We should be sitting around here asking, “How do we galvanise the four in five who do not?” Regarding utilisation, there is lots of evidence—certainly in the north-east—where we export talent out of the area; we cannot necessarily utilise the skills and qualifications that we have.

Regarding investment, as I have said before, David’s organisation, the Institute of Fiscal Studies, highlights the lack of investment in skills, which is echoed by employees as well. The Learning and Work Institute does a wonderful report about employer investment in skills, and that is at record lows as well. For me, the kernel of the problem is how we stimulate demand, utilisation and investment in skills, and tinker less with the supply of skills, but by and large, that is in the right place.

Alice Gardner: When we talk about employers, we get quite hung up with the big boys—BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce—but actually Britain is driven by SMEs, and SMEs are the powerhouse of this country and where most young people work. We forget that they do not have the same capacity as these big organisations to help and support young people, whether that is through the youth guarantee, apprenticeships or T-levels.

We need to think about how we structurally support employers to do the best they can because we are asking a lot of them. They are not always clear what that ask is, and if they are an SME, they do not necessarily have the wraparound support of numerous staff and an HR department to be able to really galvanise their organisation to support young people but also to take advantage of the talent. Of course they want these young people to come through and grow with their businesses because that is the way that they will achieve success.

With things like ATAS, we have seen some brilliant examples in some regions; I am thinking of Liverpool city region, where you have real support for SMEs to be able to bring together young people who are looking to go down that route of direct employment, apprenticeships, work placements or industry placements, and the employers to give them an opportunity to understand what the ask is. The more we do on that, the better.

Q11 Mark Swards: Finally, David, on the planning and implementation of T-levels, are employers involved enough?



David Robinson: I will echo what Alice said and try to keep it brief: it is an issue with small employers, in particular SMEs, and their engagement. We undertook some research in partnership with Oxford University recently where we did case studies of different industries across UK nations. One thing that came out time and time again for small employers was the difficulty engaging with education and training structures, large amounts of bureaucracy for relatively small organisations, and the feeling that they are excluded from policymaking. A key task for Skills England going forward will be to make sure that SMEs are as involved in the processes as larger organisations.

Q12 **Caroline Voaden:** I am going to ask you now about maths and English resits. Most students who have not attained level 2 maths and English have to continue to study these subjects in order to continue any kind of further education. Do you think this policy benefits students, and what impact do you think the policy has had on students and teachers since it was introduced? I am going to start with Darren.

Darren Hankey: Glass half full, glass half empty; I am just glad I have a glass. I will start with glass half full. I read the other week that since this policy came in, half a million young people have achieved a good grade in GCSE English and GCSE maths—like me. I got my GCSE maths when I was 22, and I am sure that it has opened up vast opportunities for them. I think I am right in saying that is probably the only education disadvantage gap that is now closing: those students who did not achieve those qualifications at 16 and go on to achieve them by the age of 18 or 19. Again, that is something that the FE sector has done and embraced remarkably well.

That said, the achievement rate is not good enough; my college's achievement rate is not good enough. Lots of students do embrace the opportunity to resit it, lots feel disheartened or failed by the system and probably things that we have talked about before, and ultimately, as a college, we are trying to do in 100 hours what they have not managed to achieve in 12 years of primary and secondary education.

Again, I will go back to the means with the investment. I have 580 hours. Ironically, DfE wants me to deliver a programme of study for 612 hours, but it only funds me for 580 hours. For an 18-year-old, it is 490 hours, so I have to take 200 hours of that to do English and maths, but then I have employers. So I might have a young person who wants to be an automotive engineer, bricklayer, carpenter, designer, electrician, or fabricator, and I have to train them with the remaining 300 or 350 hours as well as GCSE English and maths. You are not giving me the means to do the job and do everything I need to do.

So glass half full—it has helped half a million young people who have gone on and had other opportunities, but there are still lots of young people who are disenfranchised by what has happened before they get to a college. It is probably an opportunity to do things differently. There has been talk of a stepping stone qualification. As I say, it has helped half a



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million people, and it benefited and opened many doors for me 30 years ago as well.

Q13 **Caroline Voaden:** Maybe Alice or David, do either of you have any research on how you think the resit policy has affected students and teachers?

David Robinson: I actually do not think we know how well the resit policy is benefiting young people. We know very well that young people who pass at 16 are more likely to progress to higher levels of education and have good employment outcomes. Fundamentally, I do not think we know whether the same is true of students who resit, and for me, that is a really important evidence gap that we should be looking to fill.

What we do know is that once you take into account student characteristics, there is not that much variation in performance between different colleges or institutions, particularly in maths. In English, there is still some difference in college performance once you have controlled for other factors. I am not sure we need the same policy for numeracy that we do for literacy. It may be that there is more good practice that can be shared for literacy to improve standards across the board. For numeracy, the policy probably needs a bit more of a wholesale rethink.

Alice has mentioned previously about more of a baccalaureate approach. We know that many countries continue the study of maths to 18 for all students. We could be focusing on the benefits of that for students across the board, which would also have the important side benefit of reducing stigma for those who are doing resits. Certainly for maths, we may need a different approach; for English, there is more progress to be made under the current set of policies.

Robert Nitsch: Very briefly, we should think about digital as well. CAR seems to be on the right thing, but looking at pre-16, other things I would suggest are more flexibility. Progression is better than a bye. We have given a bye in apprenticeships; they are level 1 qualifications to get people moving. There is much more leverage that we could do of English and maths in apprenticeships and occupational qualifications, and the resit policy is an utter nightmare. The City of Portsmouth College has to close three out of its four campuses and has 1,200 students—200 with SEND requirements—that are due to do their resits. It takes a whole day out of the programme and destroys the delivery of education more broadly across the college for a significant period of time.

Q14 **Caroline Voaden:** We are really pushed for time, but just briefly on this, obviously literacy and numeracy skills are so important for job prospects and success in later life. If any of you have a quick idea about what an effective alternative to the resit policy might look like, we would love to hear.

Alice Gardner: An expert group thinking about the content of maths and English at GCSE would be a really good place to start because, after all,



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FE colleges are dealing with the failure that has happened up to that point.

Caroline Voaden: Looking at it at a post-16 level or going back and looking at what is happening before that?

Alice Gardner: Once again, going back and looking at the issue because it is an issue if young people have been out of school for that period of time, have reached 16, do not have a level 4, do resits and still cannot get a level 4.

Your point about the impact on teachers and young people is anecdotally quite punishing. The English and maths tutors get paid less in FE than in the mainstream and they are trying to bring on young people who have really struggled all that time to then crack that nut in two years. For the young person, they already feel that they have failed at GCSE; to then repeatedly fail is soul destroying.

Robert Nitsch: It has to be driven by a real sense of purpose as well, rather than just academic qualification.

Alice Gardner: What do we want? Do we want young people to be able to effectively communicate and understand maths in an applied manner so that they are able to start a business—as an electrician or whatever—or do we want them to get that GCSE at level 4 or 5? What is the purpose of it? If we understand the purpose, we can cure the problem.

Q15 **Jess Asato:** We know that economically disadvantaged students do not perform as well as their peers. What interventions are needed in FE to support disadvantaged students and narrow the attainment gap? EPI has called for a student premium. How might this help? I will come to David first.

David Robinson: We know that much of the reason that disadvantaged students finish the 16 to 19 phase with lower grades is due to the fact that they started with lower grades. So, of course, we need to think about supporting those students all the way through their education, from early years all the way through to 16 to 19 and beyond. But we also know that in this phase, disadvantaged students fall behind by the equivalent of around an A-level grade; not just A-levels, but we equalise it in terms of A-level grades. We also know that at the age of 16, disadvantage funding falls by about a third—so for those same students who were getting a certain amount of support at the end of secondary school, it just falls off when they then start their post-16 education.

We have proposed a student premium. We think it should be piloted so that we can understand the impact of that policy and come with similar arrangements, such as pupil premium in terms of provider accountability. But unless we can grasp why we have this drop-off and the impacts that is having, we are going to struggle to make progress with closing that gap.



Alice Gardner: We need to look very carefully at assessment as well. Robert made a really good point about SEND. SEND is not about lack of ability; it is about being supported to be able to achieve your potential. We talk about exams being the easiest way to test something. Easy is not good; it is a cheap way out. What we need to think about is a way in which we can fairly assess young people's ability so that when they go into the world of work, they can be the very best—an excellent employee, dynamic and good at their job. That can be projects, mastery, oracy, beautiful work, and exams as well because there are some bits where exams make sense.

If we get that right, it will also support those young people from deprived areas who might find cramming for a cliff-edge exam once a year much more difficult, particularly if they are also neurodiverse. There are lots of ways that we can support young people, but we need to have a follow-through. In school, young people feel generally quite supported, and when they go into an FE college, it is not that they are not; it is just that it is a change and they are suddenly in a huge place that they are not sure about, and that all has an impact on what happens next. We see the same in HE with the dropout in that first term or first year.

There is a lot we can do to support young people with mentoring but thinking about how assessment is not a privilege for those people who can cram for an exam and get a good mark; it is actually about fairness, dynamism, grabbing a nettle, and quite a tough conversation about how to get that right. It is really important that we can have trust in the system. It is not about it being easy and everybody winning; it is about rigour and thinking in a very grown-up way about how we can change our assessment system to incorporate all those things, which will then, in turn, assist the whole broad spectrum of young people.

Darren Hankey: From the chalkface again—I think the sector is wonderful, diverse, and we do a lot of good work with people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The vast majority want to learn, develop, improve, get better, and prepare for the next steps, whether it is work or higher education, and the vast majority do. The increase in poverty has been a big issue over the last few years. There was some research from Durham University about the depth of poverty, particularly in the north-east, so how long a student has been in poverty and then how widespread that is. Again, the north-east did not come out well in that research. We are finding more and more of our students have to study and work, some to support their families. We have had students who have dropped out of their college course to go to work, and that work has been precarious work—zero-hour contracts—and in the longer term, they would have been better off staying in college.

We have also had a rise of adverse impacts as well, so a rise of students experiencing sexual and criminal exploitation, domestic violence, suicide attempts, gambling, and substance misuse. So, again, with the investment that we get, we are trying to do our very best to keep the



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stabilisers on the colleges. Picking up on David's point, the support we get does drop off a bit. We also have to apply for that, so if I was a secondary school headteacher, that information would come to me about my new year 7 students, and that information about the support and finance would follow.

As a further education college, I have to seek that out from the students and apply for it, so now we have a small army of people who work on just sorting out the bursary and making sure that the support is in place. Anything that can be done to make that a little more seamless and substantial would help, such as free school meals. As I said before, child benefit and universal credit for their families have not kept up with inflation. Colleges are doing a wonderful job despite the circumstances that we are facing.

Robert Nitsch: Primarily, it is a policy issue, not a qualifications issue. We need to think about how we can leverage regional ownership of this because it is such a localised problem; I see that in Portsmouth. We also need to think much more about focusing on students as individuals, about their potential and how we use that to inform their choices in education and encourage them to do it. I definitely do not think we apply the science that is available to us to really support students in making the best choices for them.

Q16 **Chair:** Can I ask for your very brief thoughts on what actually is a really big topic? Apologies for that, but we are getting very close to being completely out of time. Student attainment between the ages of 16 and 19 varies quite wildly across the country. Why do some parts of the country achieve better than others, and what can be done to remove that postcode lottery on attainment?

Darren Hankey: Poverty is a key thing, as I have alluded to before. It is just such a big barrier for lots of our students in terms of adverse impacts it is having on them, as I have just mentioned and I will not repeat, and the fact that the vast majority of them are juggling part-time, full-time and precarious work.

Q17 **Chair:** I am more interested in how different areas of the country that might have comparable levels of poverty achieve different outcomes. Poverty undoubtedly has an impact on the delivery, but some places do better than others at helping their students to overcome that. Any clues as to why?

Robert Nitsch: It comes down to aspiration. I travel all around the country, and it is interesting to walk around at lunchtime to see how young people move around and do their business. There has been much more focus on aspiration, and some changes that we see in the way regional and local government have been organised potentially provide that opportunity, but it really has to leverage that.



Alice Gardner: We have seen some really neat examples around the country of both FE colleges and schools doing some really innovative stuff. I am also thinking about something like the Greater Manchester area, which has conceived this idea around an MBacc. It is about how you bring young people into the seven most evolving and innovative industries in the area and then how you create a pathway to those. When you have initiatives like that, you can see how young people can first feel inspired but also understand the route in and are then supported to do that.

It all starts earlier though; it starts in school. It is all about making sure that young people are aware of the choice. It is also about giving schools flexibility within the system to be able to deliver an interesting curriculum. It is about making it real and relevant, and if those young people are engaged, they are far more likely to get better results and enter the workplace with the skills that they need to succeed.

David Robinson: Just briefly, we know that most of the gap between regions is driven by differences at GCSE that follow through to post-16 education. The north-west is a really interesting exception to that, and that is where I would want to start looking. I do not know what it is doing, but it does look like there is some success there. It has the second lowest attainment of any region at the age of 16, but by the age of 18, it has the third highest, so I would want to understand what is going on in the north-west.

Darren Hankey: I do not think the north-east is too far behind. Sorry, Helen, just to push back on that research out of Durham University of Gorard and Siddiqui and a few others, they said that the deeper and wider it is, the more impact it has, and the north-east does have a lot more than other areas.

Chair: Without a doubt. I thank all four witnesses on our first panel.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jo Grady, David Hughes, Imran Tahir and Bill Watkin.

Chair: Thank you to our second panel of witnesses for attending the Education Committee this morning. First, can I invite you all to introduce yourselves to the Committee please, starting with Jo?

Jo Grady: Hello, I am the general secretary of UCU, which is the University and College Union, and we represent 120,000 staff in post-16 education.

Imran Tahir: Good morning, I am a research economist at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, an independent research institute that uses economics to analyse public policy.



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David Hughes: Hi, I am from the Association of Colleges, which represents nearly all the general FE colleges, quite a few sixth form colleges and a lot of specialist colleges.

Bill Watkin: I am chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association, representing 150-odd colleges.

Q18 **Chair:** The further education sector has experienced a prolonged period of reduced funding; we know that between 2010 and 2019, funding per student fell in real terms by 14% in colleges and 28% in school sixth forms. Can you describe the impact this has had on the sector? I will start with Bill.

Bill Watkin: It has been the case that people have had to cut courses, reduce the leadership team size and lose some student support, particularly at a time with mental health and enrichment activities feeling the pinch.

We did a piece of research called the funding impact survey not so long ago, which found that half of colleges had dropped a modern foreign language, with French, Spanish and German being the main victims. A third had dropped STEM courses, and 78% of colleges had reduced or removed student support services and enrichment extracurricular activities, which of course includes all the employability skills, careers and so on. Four in five colleges had increased class sizes in order to make them more viable, and 50% of them had reduced teaching time. So there were lots of different strategies for making cost savings because it has been a very difficult period.

David Hughes: There are four really big impacts. One is that students are getting 15 to 16 hours a week; in most OECD countries, it is 25 to 30 hours a week. That means the ones from the most disadvantaged households who need the most support are not getting it. That impact is hard to see because they are still achieving but not quite as much as they would have done.

There is a big loss of learning opportunities for adults, from 5.4 million opportunities 20 years ago down to something like 2.3 million opportunities now. That is millions of adults missing out on opportunities to retrain every year to get jobs, progress and get better work. Pay has suffered massively; if you teach or work in FE, you get paid a lot less than you did in relative terms 20 years ago because the investment has been squeezed.

The fourth is our employers, who find it really difficult to know where to invest. Employers invest less than half than their EU counterparts because they do not know where to go, it is confusing, and there is no capacity to deliver. Pay for staff means we cannot get construction lecturers, so employers cannot go and get construction training in colleges as easily as they used to. We could go on, but those are the four big impacts.



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Imran Tahir: You also see this on the financial statements of colleges. We saw a number of colleges struggle increasingly during the 2010s. At the start of 2010, 16% of colleges were in deficit. By the halfway point of that decade, over 50% of colleges were in deficit. That led to a huge programme of merging and financial consolidation within the sector, which has radically reduced the number of colleges that we have in the country. In 2010, we had almost 350 colleges; nowadays, it is about 220, and that really limits the amount of colleges available to individuals geographically.

Jo Grady: As has already been alluded to, further education has really been run into the ground by what have been continuous funding cuts since 2010. Let us be honest, Labour are inheriting a real legacy of the last Conservative Government, and I have to say it is telling that none of their representatives are here right now to listen to this inquiry.

In terms of the impact this has had on staff, staff in FE have really borne the brunt of this neglect. As has already been pointed out by David, they are underpaid, overworked and frequently disregarded. I do not think it is over the top to say that low pay is killing FE. The quality of what can be delivered in the classroom is dependent on how staff are treated; the working conditions of staff are the learning conditions of students.

Here are just a few statistics to get us going. FE teachers and lecturers are paid 25% less than schoolteachers and half of what they could earn if they go into industry. We have huge shortages of staff, particularly in some areas in FE. We have appalling retention rates, which I am going to get into later. The sector is recruiting minimal amounts of young people; 1.7% of staff—maybe even less than that—are under 25, and we are losing many to industry. We have seen funding this year of £300 million, but to be frank, while it is better than nothing, it is not even keeping us standing still. Imran's points around how many colleges and staff we have lost is telling.

Q19 **Jess Asato:** The Government announced £300 million in the autumn Budget. How will this money be allocated and what will the FE sector use it for?

Bill Watkin: Can we first just be clear which £300 million? There were two £300 million pots: one for capital and one for revenue, so I am guessing that you are referring to the revenue?

Jess Asato: Revenue.

Darren Paffey: I will be asking about capital later.

Bill Watkin: The £300 million is being put on to the funding rate, which we are very pleased about because we have always contested that it is important that principals are in a position to make a decision according to local context and need. It is much better to invest in the funding rate: the per capita funding attached to each student. It was part of our judicial



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review discussions that this money would be ring-fenced for 16 to 19 rather than the broader FE sector.

If I could just go off track slightly at this point, I did not necessarily recognise everything that Jo was saying earlier for the majority of colleges that the Sixth Form Colleges Association represents. This is one of the challenges facing an inquiry like this; the sector is so broad, and there is such a wide range of provider types all lumped into FE that it is sometimes difficult to hear evidence and discern which applies to which group. For example, things like teacher pay as opposed to college lecturer pay are not necessarily the same.

Sixth form colleges do not have the retention problems, and some actually even have the reverse of that, with staff rooms peopled by staff who have been there for a very long time. The pay gap is less in sixth form colleges, largely because they are fishing the same pool as schools to recruit their teachers and must therefore remain competitive. I recognise I am going slightly off-track, but in answer to your question about the £300 million, this will make a significant difference to the funding next year, and we are very pleased that next year does not look to be quite as difficult as it might have been without it.

David Hughes: For general FE colleges, this is quite helpful—just to make the distinction—but the 16 to 18 funding only makes up about 60% of their income, and on the other side, the adult budget is being cut yet again. What that means is that it is very difficult to balance it and incredibly difficult to address the pay issue—coming back to Jo's point—when 40% of your budget is not changing at all. The adult budget has not changed in the funding rate per student since 2010. That is quite a staggering statement. Just think about that: the amount of cash paid for a student in 2010 is now the same cash 15 years later. It is appalling. The amount of money is more than halved as well, so there are fewer opportunities.

The other issue we have is that we know there is a growing cohort of young people coming into FE; colleges have about 37,000 extra students this year, and we think there will be another 25,000 next year. They are not going to be funded because the Government does not have the in-year funding available to support them, so colleges have a real challenge: some are getting hundreds of students coming in to be recruited, and the college is not funded for all that growth. You do not get that in any other part of the education system.

This year, the Government paid only two thirds of their formula for that bit, having promised that they would pay it. I do not think they have the funding for next year, and that is a massive risk to the system. So it is good news in some ways, but it is still too little and does not address the wider issues of adult education and training, which is crying out for investment.



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Imran Tahir: Of that £300 million, what we know is that £50 million is going to be used as a one-off grant for FE colleges and other FE providers to provide their staff with pay awards. We estimate that is going to translate to a 2% to potentially 3% increase in pay, relative to what it is today. The other £250 million is going to be used to increase the 16 to 19 funding rate by 3.86%.

We have done some forecasting to figure out what this means for per-pupil funding, and actually it is not going to change relative to what it is today. That is because inflation and the demographic growth that is currently working its way through the 16 to 18 education system essentially mean that all that additional funding is eaten up by maintaining the level of per-pupil funding across this broader base of students. We are essentially running to stand still at the moment.

Jo Grady: I am going to add a bit more staff-based context to some of the answers. It is true that funding for adult education has been decimated, as has already been said. In-classroom funding for adult education is 40% lower than it was in 2010, and the pay for staff in colleges has been cut significantly in terms of what it would have been worth in 2010—as I have said—with a 25% pay gap between schoolteachers and college lecturers.

In terms of people leaving the sector, we are seeing both funding cuts to students wanting to study and wage cuts to people wanting to stay and teach, which is having a huge impact on who can access education and who chooses to stay in education. Let me read you one quotation from a survey we did with our members called *On The Breadline*, “My day consists of a banana for breakfast and then later a Pot Noodle or a mini tortilla wrap with a slice of wafer-thin ham. I drink mostly water and have a jar of Tesco Value instant coffee, which I ration.” This is just one quote from this report, which is full of similar statements and people saying that they work other part-time, low-paid jobs at weekends, that they have moved geographical locations because they could not stay where they were, that they ration the amount of hot meals they eat in a week because they cannot afford heating, and that they have called in sick because they cannot afford to get to work.

So, £50 million out of this £300 million is 2% to 3% on your pay—thank you for putting a number on it. FE workers did not get a pay increase last year. Any pay increases that we have had over subsequent years have been fought for in most cases by members because the bargaining that we get through the AOC is not binding. A 2% to 3% pay rise is barely going to cover any car parking charges, if people are even driving to work, and it is not going to close that 25% pay gap. It is not that people are not acknowledging that this is progress or is welcome, but it is not even helping us stand still. It is certainly not going to rectify the wrongs in terms of staff pay or funding for all those students that are missing out.



Q20 Jess Asato: We hear that the IFS has estimated that the Government would need to allocate an additional £200 million annually in today's prices in order to sustain 16 to 18 education funding in real terms by 2027-28. What are the likely consequences to the sector if this funding is not met?

Imran Tahir: To give a bit of background on that statistic you have quoted, what we have done is looked at the fact that there are obviously inflationary pressures, as there always are, and demographic changes at the moment. There is a demographic bulge working its way through the FE sector that started in 2018. From 2018 up until 2024, we saw the number of young people increase by 230,000 in England. Up until 2028, there are going to be an additional 110,000 16 to 18-year-olds in England, which translates to about 60,000 additional students that need to be accommodated by the sector.

Looking forward to 2027-28, in order to accommodate those extra students and pay exactly the same level of funding in real terms, you are going to need £200 million of additional funding. If you do not get that funding, the financial situation for colleges is very difficult, as fellow panellists have mentioned, and finding additional savings on top of that is going to be incredibly difficult. That was just one of the scenarios that we considered in our report, so if the Government did decide to freeze per-pupil funding in real terms, you would require an additional £200 million.

Another couple of scenarios we considered is what would happen if the Government actually froze the amount that they spend on 16 to 19 education in real terms. At the moment, we spend about £8.3 billion on 16 to 19 education. If the Government were to uprate that by inflation up until 2027-28, that would result in a 4% fall in per-pupil funding. If the Government froze it in cash terms—so this £8.3 billion was exactly the same figure in 2027-28—that would result in an 8% fall in per-pupil funding, which would be incredibly difficult for the sector.

Q21 Jess Asato: David, do you agree with the IFS's assessment of £200 million needed or is it more in your estimation?

David Hughes: It is a really good estimate; it is difficult to assess because we do not know about learner choices. We have seen more young people not staying on in school sixth forms, partly because the English and maths requirement means the schools do not want them, and trying to find 100 hours of teaching in a school for an English or maths resit—or both—is really difficult. It could be that the IFS is underestimating because they will be tending to do more technical courses, which cost more, and therefore the average cost per student might be higher.

With the labour market getting tighter as well, we might see more young people who are in work coming back into FE colleges, and that could boost that pressure on the budget. The spending review has to recognise



those numbers because otherwise, if the sector is on its knees, it will be cataclysmic.

Bill Watkin: I would add that the industrial relations landscape is looking unsettled, at least for the next couple of years. *[Interruption.]*

Chair: You can hear the bell ringing but please carry on; we do not need to react to that one. It will go again in three minutes' time and we can ignore that as well.

Bill Watkin: The cost pressures will increase, and it is not just whether funding is going to keep pace with inflation, wage rises and so on, but a host of different costs are going to put pressure on colleges and make it even more difficult to get by.

The increased demand on colleges—particularly on staff working in colleges—is another factor. The capacity of the NHS, local authorities and external agencies to provide the kind of support that was available in years gone by is not there. This puts a greater demand on colleges to provide those frontline services that previously would have been provided elsewhere, putting additional cost pressures on institutions.

Jo Grady: There is the twofold struggle that the Labour Government have inherited of increased demand, which has been covered and is to some extent demographic, and how we ensure that we fund that. But there is also the increased ambition from Labour, quite rightly, that we need a decade of national renewal to grow our economies and heal our communities. We are only going to deliver on that if we find the money to properly fund further education, and that is of crucial importance to all of us.

Whether or not the figure that Imran has helpfully provided is accurate, it has to be the starting point, or we are not going to change the economic outcome of this country or deliver for our communities. Part of that is ensuring that we deliver for young people, but there has been a completely forgotten group of people under the last Government, which is adult learners. The adult learning budget has been slashed, and if we want to see those people transition back into the labour market in a supportive way, then we have to make sure that we are giving colleges the money and resources to do that, and we do not see that at the minute.

Q22 **Darren Paffey:** I should probably put on record, Chair, that until my election, I was a member of the UCU, which Jo leads. Let us turn to the other £300 million that we were mentioning, so the capital funding for colleges that was announced for 2025-26. How do each of you believe that funding should be prioritised?

Bill Watkin: It would be nice if sixth form colleges could have access to that funding, because at the moment they are not eligible for it. They have not had the opportunity to bid for any capital funds since 2022. That



of course is going to mean problems for their estate both in terms of maintenance but also in terms of providing additional accommodation for the population bulge that is going to carry on working its way through the sector until 2028 or even the end of the decade.

At the moment, with no capital opportunities at all, we think it is extremely important that we pick up where we left off with the post-16 capacity fund. That ran for the three years of the previous spending review window and made a big difference, with 90 colleges being awarded £230 million over three years, which provided additional capacity. One thing about the capital and capacity is that if we are going to accommodate—as we have to accommodate—all the extra 16 to 19-year-olds in the population, we are faced with a choice of whether to increase the capacity of existing provision or build new provision. It is much more cost-effective to increase the capacity of existing provision, of course. Coupled with that, you have the reassurance that they are established and have a track record of success, which means you can be more confident about what you are developing. There is a real need.

David Hughes: Colleges operate about 4,500 buildings on 800 sites, so £300 million is not an enormous amount of money. What the DfE are doing is putting a formula together to try to divvy it up between the 160 or so general FE colleges. That is good; they will get a grant and be able to spend it over maybe two to three years mainly on condition: maintenance, improvement, stopping the roof leaks, stopping the windows falling in.

What we need is that kind of number every year. We are talking £1.5 to £2 million for an average college, which again, at one level, you think is a lot of money, but these are big estates with a lot of equipment. If we want cutting-edge technology that matches industry and an industrial strategy that is really going to push us ahead in terms of productivity, colleges need to have the kit, the equipment and the premises to match that; this does not do that.

In Sheffield, they need a big construction centre, and they probably need £30 million alone. They cannot get that or borrow now; when colleges became public sector they were prevented from borrowing commercially. Lots of opportunities are being missed, and there is a very strong argument to give colleges the ability to borrow—through the public sector or commercially—to allow them to have that entrepreneurial approach to getting the equipment that is needed for the economy, the growth strategy and the missions.

Imran Tahir: We have already alluded to meeting those two challenges: this demographic bulge working its way through the FE sector, and ensuring that we have enough classroom spaces and enough building space available to young people to study. The second point is, of course, over the 2010s we saw a number of colleges shut down for financial reasons, which solidified the financial situation of the sector to an extent,



but it has meant that there are far fewer colleges available in different parts of the country today than there were a decade or so ago.

Jo Grady: A key motivation behind the reclassification of FE as a public sector was, as Imran just alluded to, the huge deficits that we had across the sector. Many providers were in the red, unable to maintain and repair college estates—so we considered the reintroduction of FE and the capital transformation programme by the DfE in 2023 welcome.

Other panellists have already spoken about how crucial it is to make sure that our colleges are equipped, the buildings are fit for purpose, and that we have the best technology to facilitate learning, especially for some disciplines. I guess the one note of caution that you would expect me to say as the voice of staffing is that in terms of spending priorities, we have seen how capital investment can sometimes be wasteful, damaging or lead to vanity projects in higher education. We would not want to see that carried over into FE.

I would just make one other comment as well. We have seen the announcement around technical excellence colleges, but—just to go back to the point that I made earlier—when we have such endemic levels of low pay in FE and people leaving the sector in rates that they are not leaving any other education sector, the last thing we want to see is underpaid, vacant roles, in buildings that are therefore empty, where perhaps we cannot attract the staff for the facilities that we are investing in. So yes, investment in those facilities is incredibly important, but it cannot outpace us addressing the chronic underpayment of staff.

Q23 Darren Paffey: A number of you have mentioned the rising number of students in the sector, and we have heard about the extra capacity—space and equipment—that is going to be needed to accommodate them. Does the Government's capacity funding go far enough on that? If not, what else can be done by providers and teachers to mitigate the rising number?

David Hughes: It is definitely not enough, and they recognise that. They have had to intervene in two or three geographical areas in this year—Leeds is a good example—where they have put in extra capital. They do not have enough to do that in all the places they need to, and therefore you have colleges facing literally 500, 600, 700 students who want to learn in that college, and unfortunately they do not have the physical capacity. To Jo's point, they also do not have the staffing capacity to meet those needs. We are at serious risk of the NEET numbers, which are nudging and going up to over 1 million, simply because colleges do not have the capacity to meet the needs. There is a real problem here that DfE recognises, but Treasury does not seem to have woken up to.

Jo Grady: If I could add to that, because once that trickles into the classroom, there are obviously literal capacity issues in terms of how many students you can squeeze into a classroom. We see way more students per classroom in FE colleges than we would in schools. That



might not have an impact in terms of teaching one student; it may be seen as the same as teaching several in a classroom, but there is the pastoral care, the marking and everything else that goes along with that. In terms of the capacity and the knock-on this has for staff, it cannot be overstated how damaging it is.

Q24 Mrs Brackenridge: I would like to consider the Government's response to the staff pay gap. It was interesting to hear from some panel members that since 2010, school and college teacher pay has declined in real terms, and at the same time, that gap has been and is continuing to widen. I would like your thoughts on the Government saying that from 2025-26, all 16 to 19 education providers will be funded on an equitable basis. What does this mean to you, and does it go far enough to address the pay disparity that we are seeing? I will start with Jo.

Jo Grady: My shorter answer is going to be no, and I will expand on that. There is the issue that colleges provide for people outside of 16 to 19 and therefore employ people doing a whole range of work. We need to invest in adult learning as much as we are investing in younger person learning. That is just a fact that the Government cannot get away from, and one that the previous Government were not interested in addressing because their kids did not go to colleges, and I do not think they cared about adult learners.

Thankfully, we are not in that situation anymore, and we have a Government who have a plan and a strategy to rebuild the economy and invest in communities. That means investing in colleges beyond 16 to 19 and acknowledging the important work that they do. There cannot be any possible excuse for Wales and Scotland to have closed the teacher college pay gap but for us in England to still have a 25% gap. We need fair and equal pay deals across schools and colleges.

At the moment, we do not have a fit-for-purpose collective bargaining framework for colleges in England. We have collective bargaining—we meet with David and the AOC—but any outcomes from that collective bargaining are not binding on college employers. In some areas, we see our members getting pay deals that they are able to recommend; in other areas, we see the value of that pay falling and falling and falling.

We need massive investment in further education, which includes adult learners, not just young people. We need fully funded and equitable pay offers across the board that do not just give us 2% or 3% in one year but allow for that pay gap to be closed, and we need new national collective agreements that are binding for every single college teacher in every single college. Anything less than this will mean that our further education sector—our colleges—continue to haemorrhage really good staff. The people in this document who are leaving do not want to leave; they have chosen FE over schools, sometimes because they think they can make more of a difference there. But we will continue to haemorrhage staff if we do not address this, and Labour will find it



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impossible to achieve their ambitions in terms of a decade of national renewal.

Imran Tahir: Just to pick up on the statistics you were quoting about school and college teacher pay falling in lockstep over the 2010s, you are right to say that. What we have seen recently though is that this gap between college and schoolteachers has really opened up a lot over the past couple of years and is now around 18%, which is the largest gap on record, at least as far back as we know. What is often not picked up is what has happened with starting salaries. College teachers used to earn a higher starting salary than schoolteachers, and going back to 2010, there was actually a significant difference between the two. Over the 2010s, we saw that reversed so that now, schoolteachers are starting to earn more as a starting salary than college teachers. That is particularly important because we know that salary early in your career really matters.

In terms of college teachers, they are not identical to schoolteachers; their outside options are quite different. Industry is also a very frequent option for college teachers, and we see lots of college teachers either move to schools, other parts of the education system, or alternatively into industry. The big difference between industry and college settings is not just the absolute levels of pay, it is the fact that the college pay schedule is very compressed relative to what people can earn in industry. So you might start at a relatively good pay in a college, but five, ten years later, you are not earning as much as you would do in industry, which is a key reason why retention is such an issue within colleges.

David Hughes: The funding statement they made about the same amount going into schools and colleges is sort of correct, but schools cross-subsidise. In a school, you have teachers who are teaching pre- and post-16 and being paid at least 18%—in many cases more—because of that cross-subsidy. For colleges, the cross-subsidy comes from a budget that has been decimated, and therefore they cannot match that. Sixth form colleges are better off, in a sense, because they have big numbers, and the 16 to 18 rate has gone up a bit.

We must not forget the pupil premium that David Robinson talked about earlier. There is no pupil premium after the age of 16. There is no reason or rationale for that; it was because the DfE did it when the post-16 funding was in a different Government Department. That is why we absolutely should get that pupil premium into 16 to 19; that would make a massive difference for disadvantaged students. There is also a drop-off of funding at age 18, and that was simply to save money. There is no reason why an 18-year-old who is going to take three years to get to a good qualification outcome should get less funding than someone who has been successful in the system. They take three years because at 16, their qualifications were much lower, so that three-year period is a real positive in the system.



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We then must not forget the NEET numbers; those not in education, employment and training. We are nudging 1 million, and once you get to 19, you are in the adult funding system. We have heard that that has been decimated both in absolute terms and in the funding rate, so there are lots of problems in here that the DfE is just trying to ignore. They acknowledge the risk that colleges pay—partly compared to schools, and as Imran said, partly compared to industry—may be really poor. It means colleges cannot get construction, engineering and digital lecturers, and we have lots of examples of colleges turning away students. But they have done nothing to estimate how much it would cost and put a plan in place.

I would really encourage you to put some pressure on DfE to come up with a plan to close that gap. Jo is right that we have to close that pay gap. I agree with everything Jo says, apart from the binding; I do not want a binding system on colleges when they cannot afford it. If they are not going to be funded to close that pay gap, they cannot be forced to do it; they just would not be able to make that work. But there is a real argument for a pay review body in this sector backed by the Government that gets supported to close the gap. There is a three to five-year time period for that to happen. It is complex, but if it was fully funded, then we would all be happier about it.

Q25 Mrs Brackenridge: I have a specific question for Bill, regarding the Sixth Form Colleges Association. You withdrew your claim for a judicial review into the Government's decision to exclude your members from the 5.5% pay award following talks with the Government. What assurances did you receive that led to the withdrawal?

Bill Watkin: I will just clarify that, if I may. The decision was made to fund a pay award for schools and academies, not colleges. Some of our members—who are all part of the same National Joint Council negotiating mechanism—were awarded the extra money and some were not. So we were in a very difficult position in that we were negotiating with teaching unions for a pay settlement when half the members had received additional funding for a pay award and the other half had not.

But it went further than that. We felt there was a point of principle, which was that all the institutions—not just sixth form colleges, but all colleges and schools—are delivering a state-funded education for young people and should be treated in the same way. The point of principle was parity, and we were very pleased to have the reassurance that there was a commitment to that parity for at least the immediate future. The £50 million that has already been mentioned was brought forward to 2024-25 so that colleges could get an extra injection of funding that would enable them to make a pay award that, in the end, brought about the end of industrial action in sixth form colleges. There was also a reassurance that there would be no cliff edge in terms of what is affordable in 2024-25 has to be affordable in 2025-26; otherwise, it is a very Pyrrhic victory. We were reassured that funding levels in 2025-26 would enable affordability.



Picking up on the point about a negotiating mechanism for the whole FE sector, this goes back to my earlier point about how the FE sector is made up of very different provider types, and it is not necessarily the case that it would work to have one body to represent all elements of the FE sector. We have a very different mechanism in the sixth form college world. We take advice from college leaders and enter into a negotiation based on the parameters we are given by them. Then we reach a settlement in an ideal world, and all colleges in the sixth form college world apply that settlement.

So there is not the same kind of freedom, if you like, to negotiate locally because they sign up to a national mechanism; it works, and there is very strong support from teaching unions and employers to continue to make that work. If there were to be one single mechanism for the whole sector, there would be huge cost implications if sixth form colleges were brought into that mechanism along with general FE colleges, because the pay differential is such that you could only harmonise terms and conditions and pay spines upwards, unless you were going to face an absolute catastrophic industrial relations situation.

Q26 Mrs Brackenridge: Finally, just opening up to the panel, are there any further steps that you think this Government should take in order for FE teachers to receive a fair pay deal?

David Hughes: As I said, I want them to do an estimate of how much it would cost. They get workforce survey data from every single college; they know what people are being paid. They need to put some analytical time into saying not just how much the gap per member of staff is on average but what it would cost, and then they need a plan in place to say over what period they will close that gap. Until they do that, the words that they are committed to fair pay in FE are just vacant and wasted.

Jo Grady: I would agree. Estimating what it would cost and pledging to do that is a crucial first step and the only way that we are going to stop haemorrhaging staff from FE. I would be interested in knowing what FE lecturers have lost since 2010 in unequal pay. We have done similar pay claims on the basis of gender and other characteristics. Our FE lecturers have been propping up post-16 education by being paid systematically less, and it has to end. Very quickly, I did say, "fully funded", David, so you might have been in full agreement with me before.

David Hughes: Shocking.

Bill Watkin: Can I just add to that? I do not think we should look at teacher or lecturer pay totally separately from the service and education that they provide for young people. In sixth form colleges, for example, one reason the pay awards have reasonably kept pace with teachers is the cuts that have been made to provision. At the very beginning of this session, I talked about some of the impacts of poor funding levels in recent years in terms of the support available to young people, the class size, the number of teachers, the constraints on the curriculum, courses



that have to be cut, and so on. We need to think about the package as a whole.

Q27 Jess Asato: Many of you have obviously mentioned the issues of pay in relation to retention, and we know that 25% of college teachers leave the profession after one year compared with 15% of schoolteachers. Apart from the very important issue of pay, what are the other main reasons for this lower retention rate, and how can they be addressed?

Bill Watkin: We did a piece of work a number of years ago—in a previous era of teacher shortage—looking at what it is that keeps people in the profession and attracts them to the profession in the first place. Clearly pay was an important factor, as you say, but it was not the most important factor. The most important factor of all was drawing attention to the moral purpose of the job, the variability and the opportunity to really make a difference to young people's lives. There is something about making sure that people in the profession feel that they have value and are doing something that is worth it.

David Hughes: It is incredible that we still have such fantastically high-quality staff in college teaching, and support staff, given the pay situation, and as Jo says, that we are asking lots of them to carry on doing that because, as Bill says, they believe in it and they want to do it. But that is just not satisfactory. I know you were asking for reasons other than pay, but the pay issue is fundamental. I will put that to one side, but it is the biggest issue that needs to be addressed.

Colleges are doing amazing things; some are moving to four-day working weeks to allow lecturing staff to work from home for the fifth day. They are offering all sorts of additional leave and flexibility in terms of employment; they are trying really hard to be fantastic employers, despite the fact that they just have no money.

Workload is a massive issue: we know that the pressure on staff has increased as well as pay going down. We know that the students themselves are facing so much more pressure; Darren talked earlier about the cost-of-living crisis and impact, which alone is enough to cause problems, but the mental health issues of students have gone through the roof since the pandemic. Staff are not immune to that, of course, and mental health issues among staff now are a real concern—quite understandably—so we have to do much more to support this sector, but pay is absolutely central.

Jo Grady: In terms of what is fuelling the retention and recruitment crisis, pay is No. 1, but unmanageable workloads and increasingly untenable working conditions are as well. I will give you some data. In our survey, we found that on average, FE staff were working the equivalent of two days extra a week unpaid. Our members in FE are regularly expected to teach for 28 hours a week and more, compared to typically 21 to 23 hours for schoolteachers.



Class sizes are rocketing—as I mentioned earlier—to around 19 in our FE colleges versus 11 in sixth forms. Just the burden of work associated with that—supporting those students, doing the prep, more marking, more teaching, less time to do all manner of other things—is driving teachers out of the sector and, as has been made clear, without massive remedial public investment, this situation is only going to worsen.

I just want to return to this point around collective bargaining, and as Bill said, about people feeling valued. You cannot get away from the fact that it is clear you are not being as valued as people, potentially down the road in a sixth form college, teaching the exact same things as you, and we are not getting those pay uplifts. Often, when Government have relinquished control of properly funding this sector and giving it proper directions as to how to treat people, you are essentially relinquishing control to the worst college principal, who is just trying to balance their budget, and staff are not the most important thing—how they feel valued, how they turn up to work, whether or not they are leaving the sector—nor within their considerations. Pay, workloads, and untenable working conditions are driving the recruitment and retention crisis in FE.

Bill Watkin: Can I just add that I do not recognise the worst college principal. We did some work with college principals a couple of years ago. Many are ashamed of the pay that they are offering to their staff, and it causes immense stress to them that they are doing that. They are not comfortable with it, but they are absolutely backed into a corner. If you do not have the money, what do you do? You have to do what you can do, and every single one of my members would be saying that they absolutely need more money to pay staff. When we got more money a couple of years ago—about £250 million—all that money went into the pay award that year. It is really clear that they are committed to better pay; they are just constrained from doing it.

Jo Grady: If they have to do what they have to do, why are starting salaries for college lecturers so low but for college principals so high? As a person representing staff, I think there are other things colleges could do.

Q28 **Jess Asato:** We have very little time. I have one more question and then I am going to hand back to the Chair. What is your assessment of the Government's targeted retention incentive payment scheme? Is this a problem because there are fewer opportunities to retain college teachers who are further into their careers? Can I come to David?

David Hughes: Generally, getting some money for people in those target sectors to increase their pay for five years is a good thing. It definitely causes pressure amongst the ones who are not getting it in the non-priority sectors and creates some pressure for staff who, after five years, then what happens? It falls off a cliff edge. It is a classic DfE answer; it said, "We have a little money, let us put it in in this way." It helps a bit, but again, it is not a systemic long-term response to what is needed.



Bill Watkin: I would agree entirely. These hypothecated pots of money for specific projects have a value, but a much greater value is to make sure that the principal is making decisions at a local level, so put the money on the funding rate that will allow the principal to do that. It might be that there is not a shortage of STEM subjects in that particular college, for example, in which case maybe we need to divert the money somewhere else or we need to spread it evenly, but the local decision is what should count.

Jo Grady: It is an acknowledgement that the current system is not working and that pay is not enough. It may have beneficial outcomes for that particular subject in a particular college, as has already been acknowledged, but it has the potential to create quite bad blood among colleagues in a college. It also does not get away from the fact that if the workloads and working conditions are untenable, those people are still going to go back to industry, where they could make more, presumably working fewer days.

Imran Tahir: It is too early to evaluate the specifics of this policy because it was only introduced last year. However, there is some academic evidence that has looked at similar sorts of teacher incentive payments. The most applicable one is a study looking at a £2,000 payment made to maths and physics teachers in 2019-20. They found that there was about a 23% reduction in attrition in the year that the incentive payment was made. A caveat to that is that it was only looking at that specific year, and there needs to be something more joined up and structured to ensure that retention continues throughout.

Q29 **Chair:** Finally, I wanted to offer each of you the opportunity to respond to anything that you heard from the previous witnesses in the first panel. Is there anything that you would like to add on qualification pathways, T-levels, the attainment gap, or any of the other issues that you might have heard our other witnesses addressing?

Jo Grady: The one thing that I would say on behalf of staff that work in the sector is that the switch from BTECs to T-levels was felt to be really poorly handled, brought a huge spike in workload for staff in ways that was quite unmanageable, and they felt that the switchover was not best handled in terms of learners either. Staff who work in the sector are always happy and encouraging of us moderating what we offer for students, but they have to be included in thinking how that will be operationalised and that it does not continue to add to what is quite a difficult workload. We had and still have concerns around the defunding of BTECs and the very important role that they play in bridging the gap between academic and more vocational options.

Imran Tahir: This is all about creating viable pathways through FE and skills for young people and adults, and there are three key pillars to this. First, getting the right qualifications, as we discussed in the previous session. Secondly, getting the funding correct, and thirdly, something



which is implicit that came through in both sessions, is getting communication right.

We have seen that communication has been handled quite poorly, I would say, in terms of the qualification landscape with the level 3 qualifications reforms and continual delays in decisions being made. We have also seen it in the funding system; there are continual delays about when colleges and FE providers hear about funding, which makes long-term decisions for colleges and other FE providers incredibly difficult. It is crucial to get those three things right.

David Hughes: I just want to pick up the pathways bit. We tend to talk about the pathways as if they start at 16, but they do not; they start much earlier. We have a key stage 4 and GCSE system that is really designed to help people do A-levels and then go on to university. It works pretty well, actually. It is not funded particularly well; disadvantage funding is needed, but for the students who do that and are successful, it is not bad. It is the rest of the system that is really falling short, and we think that what we have to try to do is replicate that on the other side with the 60% who do not go on to do A-levels. I just do not think that is the right way of framing it.

We need something in key stage 4 that helps young people get an understanding of technical education—maybe fully funded day release to a college to do what I would call proper technical education so they get a flavour of it, are motivated by that, and might do well and better in their GCSE as a result of it. They get to 16, ready to start a full level 3 rather than having to start back at level 2, having to do the resit out of their core programme and being serially disadvantaged because of that.

But what we have to recognise is that the world of work is quite diverse. You cannot boil it down to the 30 or 40 A-levels we have; it is just not possible. There are thousands of jobs. What we need is a simplicity of nomenclature and to understand that there are routes that are more technical and routes that are more academic, but actually lots of young people want to do a bit of both. There is a mix and match bit here; it is not binary, and we should not separate it.

We need to fund the learners who need the learning at the right level, inverse to what it is at the moment. A-level students go through a system that works quite well; they are the ones who actually need less support. Of those who end up in college, 50% of them are doing GCSE English and maths resits. They are the ones who need the funding, and they are the ones who get the least amount of support in 16 to 19 education. They then get to 18 or 19, and the funding reduces; they then become NEET, and we push them on to the youth guarantee, which is funded completely separately. We need a much more systemic pathway to get as many young people to level 3 as possible, probably by age 21 to 23, not 18 or 19. We need to completely reframe it.



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Bill Watkin: I am not sure that is how we would interpret the different funding levels. We would say that sixth form college students per capita get considerably less than either their school or college counterparts, and there are very good reasons why general FE colleges and the population of students there get more. But it is a major problem for us; I would not say that the GCSE and A-level route is working swimmingly well.

In agreement with many others today, I would also say that this idea of a pathway for young people for whom an A-level or T-level is not appropriate is absolutely indispensable. We have to have it. We have a name for it. It is the applied pathway, which is sort of between the two. It makes sense: it is not an alternative pathway to the ones that really matter; it is a pathway in its own right.

I went to a college in south London very recently, and the average GCSE score for its 16 to 19 population was 4.4, so 4s and 5s in GCSEs were their average grades. The average grade for students doing A-levels now is 6.47. For those doing applied general qualifications—largely BTECs—it is 4.9, and for mixed programmes, it is 5.4. If you are coming into a college with 4s and 5s, you are not going to be able to easily access A-levels; they are probably not going to be suitable for you. You are not going to be able to access T-levels; the standard is very demanding, you would possibly need to do a resit in at least one of English and maths, if not both, and there is not space on the timetable for you to do that. We absolutely need that applied pathway in the middle.

More than that, we need a pathway that includes big programmes for students who do not want to do a T-level but want to major in a particular subject. At the moment, there are applied general qualifications, which are worth one, two or three A-levels. We are confident that the one A-level ones will continue to exist: they are absolutely understood and needed. We are very pleased that the Government have recently shifted the agenda and are looking more warmly at two A-level equivalences; we think that is a really important development. It would be great if the three A-level equivalents were also still available in the future.

The last thing I would say is that we all want T-levels to work. We recognise the contribution that they will make to the qualifications landscape, but tying in the delivery of T-levels to all the conversation that we have had today about funding, I see that T-level classes at the moment are quite small on the whole, and they need to be of viable size in order to continue. What generates viability is either the number of kids or the funding attached to each student, so we have to get that right.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Can I thank all our witnesses for coming to give evidence to us today? It has been incredibly helpful to us. That brings our public evidence session to a close.