



## Education Committee

### Oral evidence: [The impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services](#), HC 254

Wednesday 8 July 2020

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Apsana Begum; Dawn Butler; Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; David Simmonds; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 765 - 852

#### Witnesses

I: Annalise Bartley, Business Admin Level 3 Apprentice, Blackburn College, Darion Moore, Student (Level 3 Sport), King George V College, Trisha Spencer, Student (GCSE Adult Pathway), Leicester College, Amy Dowling, Apprentice (Level 4 Business and Administration), The Sheffield College, Rosie Arrowsmith, Apprentice (Marine Defence Engineering), South Essex College, and Jessica Edwards, Apprentice (Operations), Exeter College.

II: Jennifer Coupland, Chief Executive, Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, and Richard Atkins, Further Education Commissioner, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Annalise Bartley, Darion Moore, Trisha Spencer, Amy Dowling, Rosie Arrowsmith and Jessica Edwards.

Q765 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody, and welcome to our Select Committee. We are delighted to have you, as apprentices, appearing before the Committee today. Could I ask you to introduce yourselves and the kind of apprenticeship that you are doing? If I start with you, Rosie, please.

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** My name is Rosie Arrowsmith and I am studying a marine engineering course at South Essex College.

Q766 **Chair:** What level is that?

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** Level 2 and 3.

**Chair:** Well done, thank you. Trisha.

**Trisha Spencer:** Hi there, I am Trisha. I study GCSE Pathway, going into Access to Social Science at Leicester College.

**Jessica Edwards:** Hello, my name is Jess and I work for Great Western Railways as an operations apprentice.

Q767 **Chair:** What level are you doing?

**Jessica Edwards:** I do three different qualifications. The first one is an Institution of Railway Operators, which is certificate level, and then the Level 2 Passenger Transport Operations and the Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award.

**Chair:** Wow, well done. Darion.

**Darion Moore:** Hi, my name is Darion Moore. I am currently studying Sports Level 3 at King George V.

**Chair:** It was probably me because my microphone wasn't brilliant. Could you kindly say that again?

**Darion Moore:** Do you want me to say my name again?

**Chair:** No, the apprenticeship. I could not hear the second bit.

**Darion Moore:** I am doing Sports Level 3.

**Chair:** Well done. Thank you for coming today. Amy.

**Amy Dowling:** Hi, I am Amy Dowling. I am doing a Level 4 Business Admin apprenticeship at the Sheffield College. I am also on the leadership team for the National Society of Apprentices.

**Chair:** Well done. Annalise.



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**Annalise Bartley:** Hello, I am Annalise Bartley. I work for Rinus Roofing doing a Business Administration apprenticeship. It is Level 3 and it is Business Admin (Standard).

**Chair:** Thank you. I am going to come to Kim first, please. Kim, you go first, if you could unmute yourself.

Q768 **Kim Johnson:** I forgot. Guys, I am really pleased to see so many young people on this call this morning, so thanks for taking time out to talk to us. The question to all of you is how well have you been able to continue your training or learning during the lockdown? I will start with Annalise, please.

**Annalise Bartley:** During the whole lockdown period my colleagues have been keeping in contact via Microsoft Teams. One day a week we will go on a Teams call with my college tutor, Claire, and she will obviously run through the sessions like that. We also have Get-to-Gateway, which is an online portal where all the learning content is stored, so we have been able to work on our assignments as well while we have been off and access any learning content we needed.

**Kim Johnson:** Thanks, Annalise. Darion, the same question to you, please.

**Darion Moore:** Also our course has been using Teams as well. It would be about twice a week, half an hour sessions, going through PowerPoint and so on, yes.

**Trisha Spencer:** Our college has been using e-mails, Teams and a few other different support networks. However, due to us being back into lockdown in Leicester, our vocational and technical courses that were due to come in and do their assignments to finish it up have not been able to do that, which prolongs it to autumn. Leicester College has only one set of facilities, one set of staff, where they will be at that point training new people and new students, so in Leicester we are struggling with our preferences and obviously due to furlough they might lose their positions as well.

**Kim Johnson:** Thanks, Trisha. Amy, the same question to you, please.

**Amy Dowling:** Yes, I think I have been quite lucky. If anything, I have probably had more time to complete my work and my manager and the wider team have been able to support me, but I know it is not the case for all apprentices. We have released a report today as part of the National Society, which shows that apprentices have had less time with their providers, but also I think it was just under 5% have had their learning stopped all together. Whereas I have been quite lucky to be able to continue, I know it is not the case for everyone.

**Kim Johnson:** Thanks, Amy. There does seem to be some inconsistency in terms of the type of support that is available. Jessica.



**Jessica Edwards:** I have been supported really well. For our college lessons we have a call in the morning where we get taught about a certain topic, then we complete our work throughout the day and then return to a call in the afternoon, where we discuss what we have been going over. GWR has also set us a range of e-learning courses. That is good because we have been able to continually develop our skills at home although we are not in the workplace. We rotate around different job roles and we have had our training for our next rotations, so when we return back to work more often we will be prepared for the next rotations.

**Kim Johnson:** That sounds really good. Thanks, Jess. Lastly, Rosie, the same question to you, please.

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** During lockdown I was unable to progress as much as I would have liked on the practical element of my course due to 18-plus students not being allowed back into our college site, which is vital in eventually qualifying as a marine engineering technician. However, due to technology like Microsoft Teams and Zoom I was still able to progress on the theory side of my course over online classes with myself, my tutors and other members of my class.

**Kim Johnson:** Thanks very much, Rosie, and thanks very much for your contributions, everybody. I will go back to Robert, thank you.

Q769 **Chair:** Can I just ask, were any of you supposed to be taking qualifications exams this time in the summer or over the last few months? If you were, how were they affected by the coronavirus? Anyone?

**Trisha Spencer:** At Leicester College, obviously GCSEs and a few others got put aside, BTECs are going a different way, but those under the apprentices and technical were able to come in through June and July. They planned it miraculously, very strategic, where pupils could come in, do their assignments—the practical side of things—but in certain numbers. It would be in phases, like group 1 would come in at this time, group 2 at this time, do your assessments. But because we have gone back down to a second lockdown obviously that has all had to be cut again and the college has reclosed.

It is devastating for students at Leicester College because we have a group that obviously are doing apprenticeships and furloughed and they pick their courses with such passion. It is one of the ones that excites them, it engages them, it is what they take the most and it has been cut out. It is devastating. Also going back, when they are able to do it in autumn, the staff are going to be so stretched at Leicester College with only one set of facilities and how they have now rearranged the college to make it safer, which they have been working hard to do. It is going to put extra stress and there is no support there for the college and for Leicester through this. Leicester is in the background and we have been pushed back, but there seems to be no support.



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**Chair:** Thank you. Anyone else at all had their exams affected? Thank you. Broadcaster, there is some echo in the background. Can we just turn the mics off, whoever is not using them? Thank you. Can I please turn to Christian?

Q770 **Christian Wakeford:** Annalise, I will be honest, I have high expectations with my father being a former lecturer at Blackburn College, so I will be coming to you first. How well supported do you feel you have been by your learning providers? If there is anything that the learning providers could have done extra to help, what would that have been?

**Annalise Bartley:** Personally for me, I felt very supported by my college tutor, Claire. She made sure that we had regular one-to-ones and catch-ups, reviews with my progress and so on. She also helped me because I found it very difficult to stay motivated during the whole lockdown because it was not like there was necessarily any deadlines in place, so Claire breaking everything down for me and setting me personal deadlines and things like that helped me to keep motivated.

Any questions regarding furlough or things I should and should not be doing for my work provider during the time of lockdown was very helpful with every answer that she gave to me. I feel like Blackburn College did very well for me personally.

**Christian Wakeford:** Good. The same question to Amy.

**Amy Dowling:** Again, I think the college has done an incredible job with all the students, but especially apprentices. We have had online learning; we have had interactive sessions. I myself work in the student participation, so we could continue our student apprentice voice sessions online. I know as an apprentice we can provide our evidence in a range of different ways, which has been embraced more, so through professional discussions and that kind of thing.

I feel that apprentices are still being supported to progress with their course and the college is even loaning apprentices devices so that they can continue to work and access the online learning. I have spoken to friends that are not studying through a college and their experience has been much worse. They have not been able to access the online learning like they should be able to. I think we are doing a good job at the college making sure our apprentices are able to continue and I know I have been able to.

**Chair:** Darion, do you have any views on Christian's question? Darion, can you hear me?

**Darion Moore:** What was that, sorry?

**Chair:** Do you want to repeat your question, Christian, for Darion?

Q771 **Christian Wakeford:** How well supported do you feel that you have been by your learning provider? Is there is anything that they could have changed?



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**Darion Moore:** Our course has been great at providing stuff. We have still been using Teams. They are always making sure, checking on us to see how we are doing. It has been the same, just online, making sure we all stay on task, not behind on your course and stuff like that. It has not been that bad, in a way.

**Chair:** Anyone else?

**Trisha Spencer:** In Leicester College, I have been personally supported amazingly by all my tutors throughout this whole period. I know everyone else has had great support from who I have spoken to.

**Christian Wakeford:** Basically just to finish that with a statement, with your indulgence, Chair. Thanks for everything you are doing already. Being an apprentice, you are already an ambassador for the programme, but to come here in front of the Committee, huge kudos and thank you for coming here and almost being a super-ambassador, if you will.

Q772 **Chair:** We are going to talk about careers and apprenticeships and my colleague, Ian, will come on in a moment, but can I ask, when you were at school, were any of you given proper encouragement to do an apprenticeship? Did they tell you about it? Did they teach you about it? Can you put your hands up if you were encouraged at school to do apprenticeships? None of you. Did they have any apprenticeship advice at all?

**Jessica Edwards:** At the school I went to we did have careers events where employers would come in and talk about what opportunities they had available with regards to apprenticeships. These were predominantly within the finance and engineering industries. That obviously was not for everybody, so there was not much variety.

Q773 **Chair:** Not one of your schools taught you about apprenticeships or told you what was on offer. That is important. Whenever I meet apprentices around the country, nine out of 10 usually say to me your experience, that they had no encouragement or were not told about apprenticeships by their schools. How did you find out about them then? If I could start with you, Darion. How did you find out about doing an apprenticeship? Who told you about it?

**Darion Moore:** I found it online and my parents also.

Q774 **Chair:** Was it on Facebook or was it on an advert or what?

**Darion Moore:** It was on an advert.

Q775 **Chair:** Was it a Government advert or was it a company advert?

**Darion Moore:** A company advert.

**Jessica Edwards:** I found out about this apprenticeship on Twitter. I knew that I wanted to do something customer-service based and GWR had posted about what the apprentices from last year were doing. I saw what they were doing throughout their process and that interested me.



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**Rosie Arrowsmith:** I needed work experience for my GCSEs and I went to the Port of London Authority for an interview for work experience. They looked at my predicted grades at the time and they said, "You will be a good candidate for our apprenticeship scheme" so I came across it by accident, but it is the best thing that has happened. I am proud that I went this route.

Q776 **Chair:** They told you about it, did they?

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** Yes.

**Annalise Bartley:** I think it came up on my Facebook feed. It was an advertisement from Blackburn College, so I was just having a look. I was originally going to do A Levels and university. However, after looking into it I thought, "This is great. This is education, experience and money" so for me it was just ticking all the boxes, so that is why I went for it and obviously I have the qualifications to do it as well.

Q777 **Chair:** When you saw the ad, was it Blackburn College that advertised it?

**Annalise Bartley:** Yes, it was an ad from Blackburn College.

**Chair:** Did you just see it on the internet one day or—

**Annalise Bartley:** It was on my Facebook feed. I must have been browsing through courses and things coming towards the end of my GCSEs.

Q778 **Chair:** Did you know what an apprenticeship was at the time?

**Annalise Bartley:** My mum and dad had spoken about it, but in my school no one really spoke about it. I think Training 2000 came in, but that was about it. It was seen as something that if you did not do well in your GCSEs, that is something that you would do. However, I did really well in my GCSEs, but it was something I wanted to do so I explored it myself.

Q779 **Chair:** I think you have just highlighted a massive problem again. Actually, it is an incredibly wonderful thing to do and prestigious, yet what you have just said, still sometimes people put it out, "If you do not do as well in your GCSEs" or whatever it may be. Trisha.

**Trisha Spencer:** Yes, I heard about apprenticeships from secondary school.

Q780 **Chair:** The school did teach you about it, did they?

**Trisha Spencer:** Yes, definitely, especially Caterpillar company, that was very highly publicised. It was also advertised on buses, the train station and so forth. Yes, I have always been around the knowledge of it.

**Amy Dowling:** I heard about apprenticeships from the college. I was a Level 3 student before doing this course. Again, in school it was not talked about, apprentices. It was not even talked about in college as an



option, but then having worked in the college and learning that university wasn't for me, an apprenticeship seemed like the best option for me.

Q781 **Ian Mearns:** I am interested in delving into what sort of careers advice and guidance you got at school. For the last two years now it has been a legal requirement for schools to allow colleges and training providers to come in to talk to students in schools. I am just wondering what careers advice and guidance you did get from your school itself.

**Trisha Spencer:** We got advice on apprenticeships, college and universities. They even mentioned the Open University and at the time it was kind of like, "Why would you do it like that?" but we still got advised on it, as well as Army.

Q782 **Ian Mearns:** Having said that, the Open University looks like the normal now, doesn't it, in terms of the way in which the—

**Trisha Spencer:** We are doing that now.

**Ian Mearns:** Yes, absolutely. Jess, what about you?

**Jessica Edwards:** My sixth form highly encouraged students to apply to university. In my opinion, there was a lot more support for students choosing to go down this route. I did apply to university as well as my apprenticeship, but I am so glad I have gone down the apprenticeship route because I can gain qualifications while gaining work-based experience. I feel like that was not something I would have been able to do at university.

Q783 **Ian Mearns:** Do you have any memory at all from school of training providers or colleges coming into school to talk to you?

**Jessica Edwards:** At lunchtimes there would be some training providers come in, but again that would be predominantly the engineering and finance industries, so there wasn't much variety at all.

**Ian Mearns:** Amy, what about you?

**Amy Dowling:** It was quite a while ago that I was in school. Yes, I was pushed into going into the sixth form at the school because I was seen as one of the high achievers. I completely nose-dived and failed my A Levels, so I went to college, but did not even have the support to then make the move to college. At college it has been much better but, yes, my school experience wasn't good in terms of careers.

**Ian Mearns:** Darion, what about you?

**Darion Moore:** What was the question, sorry?

Q784 **Ian Mearns:** What sort of careers advice and guidance did you get at school? Can you remember any training providers or colleges coming into school to speak to students?

**Darion Moore:** I remember colleges coming in and speaking to students. That is about it. I cannot remember anything else.



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**Rosie Arrowsmith:** I did not have anyone come into school to talk to us at all. The only careers advice we got was the opportunity to go to the Excel Centre, to the careers fair, but that was very limited to the amount of students. If you could not get on the list you were not able to go.

**Annalise Bartley:** We had things like mock interviews by employers that used to come in and we did have quite a lot on the A Level route where you do your A Levels and university. That was the mainstream for everyone, especially high achievers. I remember saying to one of my teachers that I was interested in an apprenticeship and they were like, "Oh, but are you looking to get these qualifications?" and trying to get us to do the A Level route, but it wasn't for me.

Q785 **Ian Mearns:** Given your mixed experience of getting advice and guidance about entering the courses that you are on—and I think a lot of you are on the courses not because of any advice or guidance that you got at school—how many of you have come across others on the courses that you are doing who have dropped out because, frankly, it wasn't for them or they were a fish out of water?

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** When my first course started a couple of students struggled. They did not have enough support and they were like, "I can't do this on my own" because they had never had guidance from school. They tried to keep up and then eventually they were like, "I cannot do this" and then dropped out.

**Annalise Bartley:** There were only two people that dropped out in my Level 2 class, but I think that was just immaturity, nothing to do with the course.

Q786 **Ian Mearns:** Has anyone else got any similar experience like that?

**Darion Moore:** Yes. One person left from mine. There was not a big fuss, he just did not like the course.

**Ian Mearns:** He did not like it?

**Darion Moore:** Yes.

**Ian Mearns:** All right. Thank you very much.

Q787 **Dr Johnson:** Over this lockdown period I have taken part in a series of careers advice sessions for one of the local schools, where I spent 15 minutes talking about my career path and then the young people asked questions. That was repeated over several days with different people who had done different jobs. It made me wonder, when you are getting careers advice from a school or college, in what format are you getting it and how useful is the format in which you receive it? Are you given leaflets; is it lectures? Do you meet professionals or is it more that you have to already have an interest in that area to go and speak to someone about it yourself?



**Rosie Arrowsmith:** Personally, I had an interest. I am very in-depth in the marine industry. I have sailed since I was small and the Port of London Authority has been the sort of company that is marine just through and through, so I went to them. As a company, at the moment we have created an apprenticeship Instagram page where you can show the work through the apprentice's eyes. The apprentices have complete control, no other input from anyone else, so you get a complete view and not just corporate stuff. Also we are trying to get into new technology so it is easier to reach for young people.

**Dr Johnson:** Thank you, Rosie. Trisha.

**Trisha Spencer:** Sorry, can you repeat the question?

Q788 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** The question is essentially what format: when you get careers advice does someone give you leaflets? Do you have to know what you want to do or do you get lectures from different people in different roles about what they do to try to inspire people who have not worked out what they would like to do yet?

**Trisha Spencer:** I went to two schools and they took the approach very differently. One school was very informative about university, colleges, apprenticeships and the Army. They had people coming in, they would also have posters around and they were very engaging to get you talking to careers advice from about Year 8. It was easy-going, so you were more comfortable with it. The second school, however, it was more, "Here is some posters. Good luck".

Q789 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** You thought the former was better, presumably?

**Trisha Spencer:** Yes, definitely, they got you more ready for life as well as the curriculum. They talked about how banks worked, how to process cheques, how stocks work as well, and so even though these were side classes, they definitely got you ready compared to the second one.

Q790 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you. Is there anybody who did not know what they wanted to do for whom careers advice inspired them?

**Amy Dowling:** Yes, I had the issue that there were too many things that I wanted to do. My A Levels, I used to do biology, music and French, and then when that did not work out I studied photography at college. The careers adviser at college, at the point where I was like, "I want to make a difference for people" they were suggesting getting involved in the students' union, which I did, and a bunch of other things that I could do to get that kind of fix that I needed. Then when I was coming to the end of my presidency at the students' union, I went and spoke to the careers adviser and they were like, "What about an apprenticeship? These are the different things you could do".

Careers advice does a number of different events. They have run Upfest, which had a bunch of employers, universities and training providers all come in, talks and sessions.



Q791 **Jonathan Gullis:** Hello, everyone. One of the things I suppose we are talking about is schools and where we struggle and I get attacked on Twitter when I say this. I am a former school teacher, a secondary school teacher, and as a head of year we dealt with careers quite regularly. Do you think the big issue about apprenticeships being advertised is—and I am saying this as someone who did not know enough myself—that teachers are not fully aware or understand how the apprenticeship scheme works and therefore that means that they are not as confident to share that information with you?

Also, do you think it would be useful—and I do not know if this exists already, and I think the Chair has mentioned this before—to have a UCAS-style system for apprenticeships where you can have a one-stop shop to find all the information? If I start with Annalise first.

**Annalise Bartley:** Yes, I think that would be useful. You are right, I do not think teachers themselves know because obviously to be a teacher they have gone down the different route. They have had to do the A Levels and university. If teachers were sat down and spoken to about it that would help them to support people who want to do apprenticeships and it is not left to, “If you do not do well, you can do an apprenticeship” kind of thing.

**Chair:** Thank you. Darion, do you want to comment on that at all?

**Darion Moore:** Yes, I agree they have to do the UCAS thing. That would be good because you need the teacher to know what they are going to do, don't you, so especially for them to train on it so they can help students do what they want to do in future.

**Jessica Edwards:** I agree that schools' perceptions of apprenticeships need to change. When I was at school I was encouraged to apply to uni, whereas I knew deep down that was not what I wanted to do. Having a UCAS-style system for apprenticeships would be good. I think that system works for university, but then there needs to be another option for people wanting to go down the apprenticeship route, so that would be a good idea.

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** I think in schools the teachers are quite pushed to keep students on going into sixth form so they keep the funding. Some teachers might be like, “Oh, this is the only route”. I experienced it with some of the teachers I had in school, but my resistant materials teacher saw that I was more practically minded and it was the best way I learned. He basically said, “Find something that you enjoy, any practical route rather than sitting behind a desk and computer and go for it”. That is how I found how I wanted to do an apprenticeship.

**Trisha Spencer:** It is quite a difficult question. Yes, I think the UCAS way would be a way forward, especially in today's society. When we talk about how teachers can be talking to a varied amount of students in their class, I think they should be passing on all information rather than just pushing for one thing, because each individual will have their own goals



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and their family structures will be quite different as well. Yes, it is up to the teachers to also discuss options with their students, but I do not think it should be pushed upon teachers to do that. I think there should be a different facility to do that.

**Chair:** Thank you. Jonathan, anything else?

**Jonathan Gullis:** Just very quickly to say well done for doing the apprenticeship route. I think it is absolutely the way that we drive forward recovery from Covid, but also just in general, and it is a wonderful thing. I hope you all go on, if you are not doing degree apprenticeships, and you push to go even further with it because that is an exciting prospect. I was having a chat with my partner. If I had not gone into teaching, I wish now I had gone and done an apprenticeship in a Michelin star restaurant and become a chef maybe. I would have had a healthier diet probably as a result, so that would be one of the things. Well done to you all.

Q792 **Chair:** There is still time, Jonathan. Before I come to David Johnston, if you could give me one simple thing, if you had a magic wand—apart from the UCAS or FE and skills, which we have just discussed—that schools should do or anyone should do to help careers and more students to do apprenticeships. I am going to start with you, Trisha. Give me one thing that would make a difference to encourage more people to do apprenticeships.

**Trisha Spencer:** Maybe get more people in, past students that have gone into the apprenticeships themselves or are working for a company that does an apprenticeship to talk about it. Teachers can say so much, but students are not always going to listen, where students will listen to their peers who are a slightly older age group.

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** Yes. Teachers should have their own career fest where they get information on different types of routes and what to look for in students, so if they are more academically minded they could be guided towards university, but practically minded could be more of an apprenticeship route.

**Jessica Edwards:** Maybe the Government could continue to engage with employers and encourage them to take on apprentices. That would be a good way to get more people in. Also, assuming that these apprentices meet the criteria and are performing to their best, the employers should operate with the mindset of keeping them on as a full-time employee. Rather than when their apprenticeship ends, that is it, they should have the view of keeping them on as a full-time employee at the end of their apprenticeship.

**Darion Moore:** They should bring more people in, just keep doing it and keep doing it, so the students would know they are getting enough support and what they are going to do in the future. If you do not do it, they are just not going to do it, are they?



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**Amy Dowling:** I think pushing on from the UCAS to make apprenticeships a UCAS tariff, so then it is transferable, but also subsidise travel for apprentices as well.

**Annalise Bartley:** We used to have assemblies and things. I think it would be more useful—as Trish was saying—maybe to get people like myself to go into schools and talk about it. If employers had more of an incentive to take on apprentices and maybe employers were going into schools also that might help. At the moment apprentices are the minority, aren't they, so to get apprentices as the majority because they bring so much. I have gained so much experience from doing what I have done. Obviously I am working for Rinus Roofing and I am contributing, where I feel like people who go to university and things it is just like, "Oh, let's go out and spend all this money" where I have learned to budget and things like that. I just think it is great and I think more people should do it.

**Chair:** Yes, you are talking to the converted here. We absolutely agree with you.

Q793 **David Johnston:** Good morning, guys. Thank you very much for doing this. I had a question about how confident you feel about finishing your apprenticeships and then getting a job in the area that you are interested in. On my screen the first person who appears is Rosie, so perhaps if you could go first.

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** I am on the theory side of my course, so I will be able to complete it with time to spare, but obviously due to Covid the practical side of things has been put on hold. If you are able to help get 18-plus students back into college a bit quicker I will be able to finish the practical with a catch-up of the stuff I have missed. Sorry, what was the second part of the question?

**David Johnston:** How confident you feel about then getting a job in the area that you are interested in.

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** At the end of my apprenticeship there might be a chance of me getting a job full-time at the Port of London Authority, but if not, I am hoping to either go into the Royal or Merchant Navy and carry on my learning in marine engineering.

**David Johnston:** Great. Certainly we would all like to get you back to college as soon as possible. Annalise, you are next.

**Annalise Bartley:** I am confident that I will be able to finish my course. With the one-to-ones and regular catch-ups with my training provider I am pretty much on track in terms of that. What was the second part of the question, sorry?

**David Johnston:** How confident you feel about getting a job in the area.



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**Annalise Bartley:** Yes, I feel very confident. Currently with my employer I am happy where I am and I have been told that I have a job at the end of the apprenticeship, so that was good.

**Trisha Spencer:** I am just going to advocate for people that are doing an apprenticeship, as I was last minute put in. They are not very confident about finishing their apprenticeships due to the pushback and their exams. There are assessments that are required and as long as the lockdown does go, the risk of getting a job could fall with businesses closing. Leicester College does need more support in order to try to help these students.

**Jessica Edwards:** Towards the end of my apprenticeship I am scheduled to have an assessment. I am confident that I will be able to complete this and Exeter College has been good in helping us prepare for this with mock assessments online and feedback as well.

As for jobs in the future, I was confident about gaining continued employment with GWR. However, due to the current situation, there is not any certainty that vacancies will come up, so I just think all we can do at the moment is just try our best and continue to do our best at work.

Q794 **David Johnston:** What have they said to you about that, GWR?

**Jessica Edwards:** Our apprenticeship finishes in 2021, but we can get a full-time job after six months, so I could start applying for jobs now. As soon as something comes up that I want to do, of course I will apply for it, but it is just about waiting for something to come up in the area that I work in.

**Darion Moore:** I am confident with my course. I have finished my first year; I am on my second year now. After that I am hopefully going to university at Edge Hill, hopefully to do sports science, so yes, I am confident that I will do well and get a job afterwards.

**David Johnston:** Good. Amy.

**Amy Dowling:** Yes, I think if I get my head down and push on I will complete, but I think that is more me as a person than Covid.

**David Johnston:** Well, get on with it then. You need to.

**Amy Dowling:** Optimistic about the future? I think I can be, but there are a few steps and our report that we published today has some recommendations that I think would help that optimism grow.

**David Johnston:** Good. Thank you very much.

Q795 **Chair:** Very quickly, I know you are doing different qualifications, but have you been encouraged to do a further qualification? Those who are doing Level 3, have your employers encouraged you to do a Level 4? If you are doing a Level 2, have you been encouraged to do a Level 3 and



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so on? Has anyone been encouraged to do further qualifications to progress in their apprenticeship? Rosie.

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** Yes. In my first course it was Level 3 in operations and maintenance and I was offered to do a Level 4 in the same sort of area. But due to the marine engineering course that came up, it is more specified to the area I want to work in, so I applied to do that so I could have more job-specific knowledge and skill.

**Chair:** Trisha, sorry, you were saying something.

**Trisha Spencer:** There are students on apprenticeships at Level 3 that are encouraged to go to Level 4. The workplace that I am at, for instance, also encourages it.

**Chair:** Thank you. Anyone else want to say anything? Just put your hand up if you do. Jess, did you want to say something?

**Jessica Edwards:** I do a range of different levels of qualifications. We do one qualification through Glasgow University, but then we do a Level 2 with Exeter College as well. I think me and all the other apprentices on this scheme, our vision is just to gain a full-time job at the end of our apprenticeships.

Q796 **Apsana Begum:** Thank you so much for all your contributions. It has been very helpful and useful for us. My question is about what message you would like to give the Government about how best they can support young people in the coming months. I will go to Rosie first, if that is okay.

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** Many young people's mental health has been affected during lockdown. If schools, colleges and universities take the time to check up on students, even after lockdown, it can make the students' transition back to the new normality easier, as they are the point of contact for any concerns. Also I believe access to more online courses for young people to help increase their chances of employment in the future. These courses can entail basic advice on how to write a formal e-mail, how to present a formal presentation in front of a group, how to write a very good CV and what employers would look for in certain roles.

Q797 **Apsana Begum:** Thanks, Rosie. If others also feel that mental health is an area, do raise that as well. It would be good to know from your experiences. We will come to Jess next.

**Jessica Edwards:** Again, it is important to encourage employers to take on apprentices with the view of keeping them on at the end as a full-time employee. I think it is important that there should be opportunities for everyone, whether you are coming from A Levels, GCSEs or even another job. The apprenticeship scheme I am on is a great example of that, but most importantly people's perceptions of apprenticeships need to change because in my school it was university. I think schools' perceptions of apprenticeships need to change in order to get more people down this route.



Q798 **Apsana Begum:** Do you think it is to do with the fact that, as you say, your school spoke a lot about university? There was that focus. Was that as a result of maybe that being seen as the route for secure employment or do you think that because of Covid-19 the route of apprenticeships is now more uncertain and you think that is having an impact as well?

**Jessica Edwards:** Yes, definitely. I have friends that are at university and they have had their learning online, whereas I am doing an apprenticeship and I feel like I have had even more learning online than they have. That is something important to look at, that you are still gaining qualifications for an apprenticeship.

**Apsana Begum:** Thank you, Jess. We will come to Annalise next.

**Annalise Bartley:** I would agree with what Jess is saying. Employers need to have the incentive to take more apprentices on and to make sure that they are secure at the end of their apprenticeships when they have the qualifications.

**Apsana Begum:** Again, about security of long-term employment. Thank you. I come to Amy next.

**Amy Dowling:** I have a few, so I will try to be quick with them. The return of day release for under-25s and the Government paying that day release will also give an incentive to employers because they do not have to face that challenge of cost there. Longer apprenticeships on the whole would be better as well because then it gives more opportunity for a wider sense of learning, so you can include things like SRE, things on mental health and about sustainability and green education.

I would agree with Jess that an incentive for employers similar to what we see in other countries is a good way forward. Again, I agree with Rosie about mental health and I think by prolonging apprenticeships, to make them longer and the day release, it gives the opportunity for apprentices to access the same type of support they would get if they went to a college or a university. They would be able to have that wraparound service that a lot of apprentices do not get.

Then the last thing is the cost of living. Obviously I think we can all agree that £4.15 is a ridiculously low wage to live on for anyone. The idea would be for that to be raised to a living wage. I think there are other ways that we can reduce the cost of living for apprentices. I already mentioned subsidising travel for apprentices. I also think tools and equipment that apprentices need to complete their job or complete their course should be provided to those apprentices, because if you are earning £115 a week and are expected to buy your tools and a laptop, there is no money left there. There are quite a few different things but I think the cost of living—

Q799 **Chair:** Can I ask you—you do not have to say how much you are earning—how many of you are earning above the apprenticeship minimum wage? If you want to say then tell us, but if not, just say that



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you are earning above. Is it significantly above or just a little bit above?  
Amy.

**Amy Dowling:** I am earning above and I am proud that my employer, Sheffield College, pays apprentices above minimum wage.

**Chair:** Thank you. Anyone else significantly above the apprenticeship minimum wage? Hands up.

**Annalise Bartley:** Minimum wage.

**Chair:** Annalise, sorry, what did you say?

**Annalise Bartley:** I am on minimum.

**Chair:** Minimum. Jess.

**Jessica Edwards:** Yes, minimum, but we have the opportunity to do overtime, so when you do overtime you are paid at the same rate as someone who is qualified in that role.

**Chair:** Thank you. Rosie.

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** I am above, but on the first year of my apprenticeship I was on the minimum wage.

**Chair:** Are you significantly above or just a little bit above?

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** I am not 100% sure what I get an hour.

**Chair:** Darion.

**Darion Moore:** I am on the course. I am in college still.

**Chair:** Yes, of course, sorry. Trisha.

**Trisha Spencer:** No, I am not on an apprenticeship. I am on a different course. I was swapped in last moment.

**Chair:** Thank you. Apsana, sorry, do you want any more questions?

Q800 **Apsana Begum:** Yes, thank you. Coming on to Darion next, your message for the Government in terms of what they can do to support young people in the next coming months, do you have any ideas or thoughts on that?

**Darion Moore:** Keep on with the online strategy. Just keep an eye to make sure that students are on track with their work and stuff, not falling behind, and make sure they get the support they need with mental health and stuff like that as well. You do not want them working alone and stuff like that.

**Apsana Begum:** Thank you. Trisha.

**Trisha Spencer:** I would say educational facilities are doing the best that they can as they are, but what they need is financial support from the Government. If we are talking about mental health, it is not just the



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students, it is the staff too, and it is quite easy to forget. Obviously students, even myself, we need the support and we are getting the best that we can. Each district, each town, each college will have individual needs that need to be assessed by the Government.

If you truly want to get people doing the apprenticeships, yes, you do need to have a look at pay because £4-something is not enough to cover living, especially for those that might be living alone and not with their families. That needs to be taken into account.

The Government need to come in with the support of finance, help—especially over this juncture—with the facilities in order for them to help in the support of their students and those doing the apprenticeships, especially those doing apprenticeships at the moment that definitely need to do practicals and so forth and who might lose their jobs over this. They do need that and they do need security after the apprenticeship has finished to get the job. If you are just going to have loads of apprentices coming through and never giving them a job at the end, where does that leave that person who has just dedicated a set amount of time to your company?

**Q801 Chair:** Could I thank you very much? My first-ever speech in Parliament when I got elected in 2010 was about apprentices. I have employed six in my office and they have all gone on to do great things. Hearing you today is inspirational. It reminds me why all politicians and everyone in politics should do everything they possibly can to encourage employers and the Government to push apprenticeships as much as possible. I do appreciate your evidence. It is very thoughtful and it has given us a lot of good advice that we will take to Government.

I have just been told that the broadcasters had problems in the first five minutes, so your introductions sadly were not heard, so I am going to have to ask you to do them all again. If you just introduce yourself, your course or your apprenticeship and your level and what part of the country you are from, if you want to. That would be great. I am going to do it from where I see my screen, so I am going to start with you, Rosie.

**Rosie Arrowsmith:** Hi, my name is Rosie Arrowsmith. I am currently studying a marine engineering course at South Essex College and I work for the Port of London Authority. I am from Kent.

**Trisha Spencer:** Hi, I am Trisha. I am from Leicester. I study at Leicester College doing GCSE Pathway. I am hoping to get on to the Access to Social Science. I am also the LGBT officer at the student union.

**Jessica Edwards:** Morning, my name is Jess and I work for Great Western Railways as an operations apprentice based in Bristol. The apprenticeship involves rotating around different operational and customer service based roles. I am working towards three qualifications: the Institution of Railway Operator Certificate; Level 2 Passenger Transport Operations and the Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award.



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**Darion Moore:** Hi, my name is Darion Moore. I am currently studying at King George V College doing Sports Level 3. That is Southport.

**Chair:** Thank you, well done. Amy.

**Amy Dowling:** I am Amy Dowling. I am studying Level 4 Business Admin at the Sheffield College and I am also on the National Society of Apprentices leadership team.

**Chair:** Thank you, Amy. Annalise.

**Annalise Bartley:** Hi, I am Annalise Bartley and I work as a credit controller for Rinus Roofing Supplies. I am studying with Blackburn College doing their Level 3 Business Administration (Standard).

**Chair:** Thank you. I hope you all go around the country as apprentice ambassadors and definitely go back to your schools, because if you go back to your schools and tell them what you are doing, I suspect you will have loads of pupils wanting to do apprenticeships, so well done all of you. I think we should do a round of applause online, if we can, everybody. It is great. We wish you every good luck and thank you so much. Keep healthy and safe and maybe we will speak to you again, but well done.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jennifer Coupland and Richard Atkins

Q802 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Thank you for coming. Could I just ask you to introduce yourselves briefly for the benefit of the tape and those watching on the internet? I will start with you, Richard, please.

**Richard Atkins:** Good morning. I am Richard Atkins and I am the Further Education Commissioner.

**Jennifer Coupland:** Good morning. I am Jennifer Coupland and I am the Chief Executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education.

Q803 **Chair:** Thank you. I have been advised by the Clerk I should note that when I was Skills Minister I interviewed Richard for the FE Commissioner post and strongly recommended his appointment, so thank you.

Very briefly, you were sitting in on the apprenticeship session earlier and I am sure you thought they were inspirational. What was the lesson you both learnt from what they have told us, Richard?

**Richard Atkins:** Can I take two? I thought they were inspirational; I enjoyed hearing from them. I was very pleased and encouraged to hear that their training had continued during the lockdown, even if not all elements, the theoretical, the support, the tutoring. I was impressed by the level of support they had been getting and continuity.



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Q804 **Chair:** Thank you. In a nutshell—and we have to be concise today—what is the lesson?

**Richard Atkins:** My second lesson would be the careers information. Advice and guidance in schools needs to improve with apprenticeships.

**Chair:** Thank you. Jennifer.

**Jennifer Coupland:** Hi. I thought they were inspirational as well, Rob, just a fantastic bunch. It does kind of remind you why you do this job. Like Richard, one of the things I took from it was just how speedily the education sector has been trying to respond to the pandemic and move people to online teaching and learning and trying as best as they can, in the circumstances, to support students to achieve. I was also quite pleased to hear that many of the assessments that people were meant to be undertaking during the lockdown period were nonetheless able to go ahead, so that was an important thing for me in my role.

Q805 **Chair:** Richard, if I start with you—I know that FE colleges have done a remarkable job during the lockdown and that was witnessed by the evidence we heard—have you made an assessment of the number of FE students who have not been able to learn for one reason or another or the quantity of them? What have you been doing to try to support them?

**Richard Atkins:** I will tell you the characteristics. The word I would use to describe the FE colleges' response to the lockdown is magnificent. They have exceeded the expectations often of employers, stakeholders and so on.

In terms of learners, if I break them down into groups, I think that for Level 3 learners, and to some extent Level 2, engaging them in online learning was less challenging than for Level 1 learners in particular. I think for those and also for those on very practical programmes, it is difficult to do bricklaying or hairdressing online. Although the theory could continue, a lot of those learners have chosen apprenticeships or courses specifically because they want to do practical as well as theory, so those have been difficult areas, but the majority of learners in colleges have had support through—

Q806 **Chair:** We know that schools have been doing a remarkable job too, but we know that, according to University College London, over 2 million pupils have been doing hardly any schoolwork at all. Have you made any analysis of how many FE students have not been able to do work during the lockdown for one reason for another?

**Richard Atkins:** I do not have an exact number, but I would definitely say that the majority have received online support in tutoring and teaching.

Q807 **Chair:** Do you mean the vast majority or what figures?

**Richard Atkins:** I would say a very significant majority.



Q808 **Chair:** What have you been doing to work with FE colleges to help those students who have not been able to? They may have had difficulty accessing online or whatever or FE colleges may have had difficulty in reaching—whatever reason it is—those FE students who have not been able to learn during the lockdown. What have you been doing as FE Commissioner?

**Richard Atkins:** We have been doing the best to share best practice. Since I took up the role in 2016 we have introduced a range of national leaders of further education, national leaders of governance. I have a small team of 16 retired principals and finance specialists who do all they can to support colleges during this period—

Q809 **Chair:** What have you done specifically during the lockdown?

**Richard Atkins:** Further than we normally do. We have extended our service. In fact, we stopped doing interventions or anything that people might regard as our more difficult work and we focused entirely on support for colleges in a range of ways: their financial sustainability; their quality. Clearly with the numbers of learners involved the individual interactions were for the colleges to manage, but we worked very hard at sharing best practice. I have written to all colleges on a number of occasions and we have tried to make sure that every college remains sustainable and focused on providing the teaching and learning support during this period.

Q810 **Chair:** You are saying it is a minority of students who have not been able to learn. What are you going to do with the colleges to help these students?

**Richard Atkins:** I was pleased that the majority of colleges have already brought back in during June and July—we heard that from the students earlier—those requiring practical assessments and practical teaching as fast as possible. I am concerned about young people being out of learning for significant periods. I am encouraged that so many colleges are planning to fully open in September and are already working on logistical strategies to make sure there is social distancing, but that teaching and learning can go on, including practical teaching and learning, from September.

Q811 **Chair:** Thank you. *Times Higher Education* has found that more than a quarter of colleges currently in intervention have been in that process for more than two years and a whole college group being in intervention for nearly four years. What is going wrong here and why did you, as the Commissioner, pause your activity during the coronavirus, and why do FE colleges and intervention have such varied experiences?

**Richard Atkins:** Because every college is different, I guess, Robert. That is the truth. There is no standard type of FE college in the way it might be easy to characterise a secondary school or a primary school, so the reasons they get into difficulty—whether they are quality difficulties or financial difficulties or both—can vary one from another.



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Obviously I like the statistic that on average colleges during my period have been in intervention for 16 months. Moving colleges out of intervention is complex. It is a task that all of the agencies work to support. We do have a small number of stuck colleges on the bottom of the page from the Chief Inspector, but it is a very small number. Out of the 242 incorporated colleges I could probably count on the fingers of one hand the number that are genuinely stuck. We work closely with those colleges to ensure that the governance, the leadership and the right framework is there for them to succeed. In some cases that turnaround can happen remarkably quickly. In other cases it can take longer for a whole variety—

**Chair:** Okay.

**Richard Atkins:** The numbers are remarkably small out of a sector of 242.

**Chair:** Thank you. Given that the Association of Colleges has found that 40% of colleges predict their financial health will get worse due to a drop in income over the pandemic and that 13% fear insolvency, how do you see your role as Commissioner changing in the aftermath of the coronavirus?

**Richard Atkins:** I have been doing two or three things with my team during the virus and leading up. First of all, I have been working closely with colleagues in the SFA to analyse the financial health of colleges and in particular to look at their cash flow forecasts, so I have a pretty good idea of which colleges are most at risk of running out of cash between now and 31—

Q812 **Chair:** What proportion of colleges do you feel need an intervention now?

**Richard Atkins:** Those colleges would not necessarily need intervention. If they require more funding they need to come forward and ask for that. We may respond to that in a number of ways. It might be very light touch with the college. Obviously the first place colleges go for financial support is to their banks. If they are not able to borrow from their banks, the bank of last resort would be to come to the Government. There is a fund to support colleges.

**Chair:** What proportion of colleges? You must know how many.

**Richard Atkins:** I have a figure in my head that I am working on, an assumption that at risk at the moment there are 30 or 40 colleges going into the next financial year, but until I see their financial return on 31 July with colleagues, where they are going to present the budget and the financial outlook for next year—could I also say how difficult it is for principals this year and finance directors? We have never had a year more difficult to put together a costed curriculum plan, which is the engine room of any college, Robert.



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A costed curriculum plan, for colleagues on the Committee, is where colleges need to be able to plan for the number of students, the average class size and the number of staff who will be in front of those teachers, the costs and the contribution to overheads. It sounds quite straightforward, but in colleges with thousands of learners it is always challenging. This year, with a potential 50% plus drop in apprenticeship starts, potentially with unpredictable 16 to 18 numbers, with HE numbers being subject to the new numbers cap at 5% growth for universities, plus the commercial income that a lot of colleges have lost already, it is a complex picture for each college. At the moment, 30 to 40 colleges would be of concern. Until I have seen their detailed financial return on 31 July it would be foolish of me to give a precise—

**Chair:** Thank you, that is helpful. Are you okay if we call you by your first names? I should have asked you that, by the way. Jennifer, are you happy with that?

**Jennifer Coupland:** I am very happy with that. I should say, Rob, I have some sound issues. I do not know if it is just me, but I am experiencing quite a lot of crackling.

**Chair:** Yes, I think it is like Rice Krispies this morning but—

**Jennifer Coupland:** It is not just me then. Okay.

Q813 **Chair:** Yes. We will just plough through, but we are very grateful to the broadcasters because it is an immense job in what they do. Can I just ask you how IfATE intends to support the endpoint assessments when organisations have gone under?

**Jennifer Coupland:** Do you mean when employers have gone under or when—

**Chair:** The employers or the training organisations.

**Jennifer Coupland:** At the moment we have worked very hard to put ourselves into a position where we can flexibly approach endpoint assessment for apprentices who have—

**Chair:** Broadcasters, we will carry on with the questioning and I will come back to Jennifer later. If we can switch her off and get her back on again, that would be helpful. Richard, can you still hear us?

**Richard Atkins:** I can, Rob. I can still hear you.

**Chair:** Thank you. I am going to move on to Kim Johnson.

Q814 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Richard. As we know, the FE sector has suffered as a result of austerity in the past 10 years, so my question to you is kind of linked to what Robert has just been talking about. I wanted to know your assessment of the financial stability of colleges in the aftermath of the lockdown. Are you confident that providers will be able to safely reopen for all students in September? Thanks, Richard.



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**Richard Atkins:** Thanks, Kim. First of all, I would say that colleges have faced a perfect storm for the last seven to 10 years, not just the fact that the funding did not increase, but the fact we had such a sharp demographic downturn in the number of 16 year-olds, coupled with the removal of the numbers cap for universities. Colleges of course do not have a natural marketplace. They operate in marketplaces with school sixth forms, with universities, with training providers and so it has been a perfect storm. I think colleges have done a magnificent job, to be honest, by keeping their heads above water during this difficult time.

Next year they are going to have an injection of about £400 million additional funding, core funding. The 16 to 18 rate is going up for the first time for almost 10 years and there will be additional money for specialist STEM subjects and others, so there is an improvement. Of course at last the demography starts to go up. For next year nearly all colleges will see a demographic increase in their area.

However, as I said earlier to Robert, the unpredictables at the moment are greater than they have been in my 40-year career in the sector. We do not know how many employers will take on apprentices and work with colleges. We do not know how many of these young people who have not been in learning since March will come back to college and enrol in September and we do not know how many students will come and do HE and so on and the commercial income. It is a very unpredictable time, which is why I want to wait until I see colleges' best estimates for themselves.

I always worry about the financial stability of the sector, but I am just a touch more optimistic about next year than I have been about the last two or three years, but I do believe that there are, in my view, around 30-plus colleges that are at risk of running out of cash next year, but those colleges always receive financial support. Colleges do not just stop running. Even in the most extreme cases that I have been involved in—a handful over the four years of those colleges—my focus has always been on ensuring the ability for teaching and learning.

Q815 **Kim Johnson:** Could you just say a little bit then about how confident you are about the colleges reopening safely in September, please, Richard?

**Richard Atkins:** I am confident that they will be reopening and I am confident they will be reopening to provide the service to all their learners. I am confident of that. Now, whether some of them are able to do that at full capacity or some of them have to develop timetables and arrangements where at any time they are only, for example, 75% occupied in terms of total student numbers, I think that will vary from college to college. The space utilisation in the sector varies widely. The types of learning that go on vary widely. The numbers of learners you can have in a motor vehicle workshop is completely different to the number in a classroom. It will vary, but I am confident that the colleges



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will open in September and I am confident they will provide a service to all the students.

**Chair:** Thank you, Richard. I know there is so much to say and we could talk for hours, but we have a lot to get through. I mean that in a very polite way, because I have massive respect for your work.

Q816 **Kim Johnson:** Finally, you have mentioned that some colleges are struggling. In your role as FE Commissioner, what support are you able to offer those that are struggling?

**Richard Atkins:** I talked earlier about introducing national leaders of further education and national leader governors to provide peer support to colleges. We also introduced diagnostic assessments. They are private, unpublished visits to colleges by a team of three of my former principals and finance specialists. They are private, unpublished and a free consultancy. We have done that in over 70 colleges now and produced reports for leadership and governors on a private basis of recommendations.

In a few cases we have come away and said, "You are doing everything you could be doing anyway". In the majority of cases we have said, "Perhaps you want to consider the following" and we have added recommendations. We normally go back after three months or six months to see how they are getting on. We try to do that in the most confidential, private and supportive way and that is the bulk of our work. Although we currently have over 30 colleges in intervention, some of those will be improving, some of them will be—

**Chair:** Okay, got it. Thank you.

Q817 **Apsana Begum:** Richard, you have said a bit about the support that colleges have received and will continue to receive. There have been lots of bailouts for colleges and yet colleges are still in need and receiving bailouts. Who do you think is to blame for the failure to stabilise the college sector? Is it college leadership and governance or is it the lack of Government investment into the work of your office?

**Richard Atkins:** I am not sure it is investment into the work of my office. It is investment into colleges, I think. Clearly I welcome very much the additional £400 million investment next year. As a former principal for 20 years, I would welcome it even more because one knows that one can always spend more money on education, but my job as a principal was always to balance the money available to me to provide the best possible education. I go around the country and see that. Some of the colleges I visit that are in intervention have been failures of governance and leadership and I think governance is a very important element of this sector.

We rely on local business and community volunteers to act as governors. They play a crucial role. The overwhelming majority do a fantastic job, but we sometimes get failures of governance and leadership. In those



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individual instances I think it is a failure of governance and leadership. I welcome very much the further investment next year of £400 million and I would like to see more investment going forward because it is so vital to the economy.

**Q818 Apsana Begum:** Last year Dame Mary Ney was commissioned by the Minister to review the financial oversight of colleges by the DfE and the ESFA. The Secretary of State has been sitting on the final report I think since the end of 2019 and there is no indication of when it is going to be published. Why do you think it has not been published and what can we learn from the review?

**Chair:** Give us a couple of sentences.

**Richard Atkins:** I was one of the people interviewed by Dame Mary Ney, I think on more than one occasion, along with others. It clearly is not my responsibility to publish that report. I did not officially commission it and it is not my responsibility to publish it. I believe that a review of the financial oversight policies is a positive thing because we want to move forward and learn lessons for the future. I am sure that the Department is doing that.

**Q819 Chair:** I am going to pass on to Tom in a minute because, sadly, we still do not have IfATE back online. I know you do a superb job in going around colleges in the inspection regime and the work that you do, but what I am not clear about is what has changed with the coronavirus. What are you going to do that is different and how are you going to intervene, given everything that has happened? It is not the usual work that you do already.

**Richard Atkins:** I think it is nuancing our current work. To start with we moved online; you can imagine that. I am hoping that we are going to get back out into colleges from September because you understand the college if you are out there. I think we will be doing even more diagnostic assessments, lighter touch, private, confidential, free consultancy visits to help colleges. I hope that we will be doing fewer interventions. The trigger for an intervention is either a grade 4 Ofsted or insolvency. I am delighted to say we have had only two grade 4 inspections this year and we have had three grade 1 outstanding.

**Q820 Chair:** We have talked about the financial struggles of some colleges. You have suggested there are about 20 to 30. I am still not clear what your plan to build financial resilience is. What are the key elements that you are doing to help these colleges, especially given that they have had financial hardship during the coronavirus, even with the Government intervention?

**Richard Atkins:** First, the financial hardship varies hugely from college to college. Some colleges with large amounts of commercial income could have lost a lot of income; others have lost remarkably little. Many colleges I have spoken to are going to be financially stable at least for next year.



Q821 **Chair:** I am talking about the ones that are not. What is your plan to help and to build financial resilience with these colleges?

**Richard Atkins:** First, to talk to their banks and see whether the banks will support the colleges financially. If that is not the case, they come to the Government and there is a fund to support colleges. We will be approaching the support for that in the lightest touch way possible, but clearly if money is going to flow out from the Department to a particular college—and we are usually talking millions of pounds—some form of health check on the college to ensure that money is needed and is well used is essential. What does not happen in this sector is colleges simply close.

Q822 **Tom Hunt:** What assessment have you made of the quality of remote education by FE colleges over the past few months? Connected to that, have you felt that your office has been fully able to carry out its oversight role over the last few months?

**Richard Atkins:** The speed and extent of the switch to online learning was remarkable and terrific. I think the quality of what went on will inevitably be mixed in places. We are asking members of staff who may not have been involved in online learning much before to develop lesson plans and deliver lessons. I welcome the fact that Ofsted is going to carry out a review of this in some detail in the autumn. I welcome that and that will be more evidence to get to the quality. What we have heard from the learners today is also the picture I am hearing in colleges, that the level of support through tutoring as well as through teaching online has been very good, has exceeded lots and lots of people's expectations.

I do not have statistics to tell you at this early stage, after two or three months of doing this, exactly how many were outstanding, good, requires improvement and whatever, but I can tell you that in the majority of colleges we have worked with and the majority of principals I have spoken to the majority of the online learning has been excellent. I have been particularly impressed with the support for vulnerable learners.

Q823 **Tom Hunt:** How many colleges have you visited during the lockdown? How many have you done by actual visits and how many by online visits?

**Richard Atkins:** I would say that we have done about 20 to 30 visits during this period. We are just stepping that up. During July we are probably doing at least a dozen and some in August. During lockdown we moved much more to a "call us if you require help".

Q824 **Tom Hunt:** How many colleges did you do online during the lockdown?

**Richard Atkins:** As I have just said, I would say that we made about a dozen online visits. We then had at least another 30 or 40 individual telephone calls or online conversations with principals or chairs to give advice or support.

Q825 **Tom Hunt:** Did you visit any at all, because they were open during



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lockdown?

**Richard Atkins:** No, we did not. My first appointment to visit a college is in August and I am expecting from September we will be out visiting colleges as much as we can.

Q826 **Apsana Begum:** How confident are you about the process for awarding vocational and technical qualifications this year?

**Richard Atkins:** I am confident because I think the colleges and the independent training providers have prioritised those students who require their final assessments and qualifications to be achieved and their licences to practise to be achieved. They have been the first learners to come back for their assessments during June and July. There is an element of lecturer-teacher assessment in this, but in the same way as the GCSEs and A Levels. It is different, it requires a degree of moderation, but I think in the circumstances it has been absolutely the right decision to take. These young people now need to achieve their qualifications, their licences to practise and we want them to be in the workplace as soon as possible.

Q827 **Apsana Begum:** You do not think there are any particular elements that may stifle or have an impact on the process at all? You seem very confident about the process.

**Richard Atkins:** There was a gap in learning. Apprenticeship regulations were amended accordingly so that there could be pauses in the apprenticeship programme, which I think was a very sensible thing to do. We moved to assessments, with teachers being more involved in making those assessments, as we have done across the whole range of qualifications. I do not have particular concerns that lots of students will not achieve this year.

We will have wait until we see the statistics in the autumn and winter as to the success rates, the achievement rates for students this year, but I have no reason to think that the achievement rates will be well out of line with other years. I accept that it has been a really difficult time in particular for all those students and learners, but as you heard earlier, they have been able to continue with their theory. They have had tutorial support, support from employers and colleges online and others have to work quickly to enable them to achieve their assessments.

Q828 **Apsana Begum:** One of the highlights of the last session at the end was about mental health support and the impact of that on students and also apprentices buying their own equipment and so on. I wanted to highlight that again. Do you have any thoughts on that in particular?

**Chair:** In a nutshell, please, Richard.

**Richard Atkins:** Only that mental health is a key issue for colleges and young people. It was even before lockdown, but after lockdown it will be an even bigger issue and colleges are very aware of that.



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Q829 **Chair:** What are you doing to check on the pastoral care that many colleges are doing for students?

**Richard Atkins:** It is Ofsted's job to assess that. Ofsted is the only agency that assesses the quality of provision and reports on it and publishes it. My job is to work with colleges to help them improve, particularly the capacity and capability.

Q830 **Chair:** But surely it is something you would be interested in to know about.

**Richard Atkins:** I am very interested in it and I work closely with the ESFA and Ofsted to ensure that I keep on top of it. Mental health is a key issue that we are very aware of and we do all we can to spread the message, but it is not my role to inspect and report on the quality of everything that goes on in colleges.

**Chair:** Thank you. I think we have Jennifer back online, which is good news. We are going to probably have another session with you, Jennifer, because obviously you have missed half of it.

**Jennifer Coupland:** I am so sorry.

**Chair:** I am going to bring in Christian Wakeford, who has a number of questions he would like to ask you specifically. But do not worry, these things happen.

Q831 **Christian Wakeford:** Jennifer, what is your assessment of the financial health of the independent training providers and what needs to be done to support that area of the sector?

**Jennifer Coupland:** My role in the institute is not to assess the financial health of the independent training providers. That is an ESFA function, so it is not something that I am directly involved in through the institute. In the Institute for Apprenticeships we are responsible for working with employers to set the standards for apprenticeships and technical qualifications to make sure that employers get the skills that they need from training programmes that we run.

Q832 **Christian Wakeford:** Linked to that point, if the training providers are struggling or going out of business, will that not have a potential impact on what your role is and what you are trying to achieve in doing that if they are not able to achieve the training?

**Jennifer Coupland:** Part of having a successful apprenticeship programme is having a successful apprenticeship provider market, through both colleges and independent training providers. The ESFA has launched the post-16 provider support package and I know that a number of providers have been taking advantage of that to help them through the pandemic period.

Q833 **Christian Wakeford:** What is your assessment or has there been an assessment of how well providers have successfully continued to deliver training and learning to their apprentices?



**Jennifer Coupland:** We have done a couple of things. We have an apprenticeship panel at the Institute for Apprenticeships. There are 35 apprentices on the panel and they have conducted their own survey of apprentices to find out more about their experiences during the lockdown. It was interesting, because listening to the contributions from apprentices in the earlier session it is pretty clear that there has been a significant disruption to apprenticeships. From our survey data, 57% of apprentices say that they have experienced disruption to their apprenticeships, but many of them are saying that their training has moved online and they have been able to continue to learn, particularly the off-the-job elements of their training programmes. That has been really positive.

We also conducted a smaller survey of employers directly and 60% of the employers that responded to us said that they were able to continue to train their apprentices in a virtual way during the lockdown and have not had to resort to pausing their apprenticeship training, which is obviously the other route that people can take.

Q834 **Ian Mearns:** To both panellists: what support do you think the sector needs now to continue to deliver high quality education to learners in apprenticeships and technical and vocational education?

**Jennifer Coupland:** I hope we are going to see a bit more from the Chancellor and his recovery package this afternoon in that announcement, but key to the success of the recovery is going to be three things. The first is additional support for employers to incentivise them to continue to take on apprentices over a period. From our employer survey, it is pretty clear that small businesses in particular are not feeling particularly confident about recruiting at the moment; 36% of them said that they were uncertain about being able to recruit an apprentice as opposed to 19% of larger firms. Some kind of support there for businesses to get back on to recruiting apprentices would be an important part.

Also it is recognising that apprenticeships can only be one part of a recovery package, because they are jobs and clearly jobs are going to be affected in different ways across different sectors. We would like to see some support for colleges to offer more flexible training for both young people and adults who might find themselves out of work for a period of time so that they can upskill and retrain. That would be an important feature for us.

**Richard Atkins:** I agree with everything Jennifer said. I see two things. The first is to increase the flexibility of the rules so that colleges can do some of the things that Jennifer has talked about and the second is public transport. I see public transport as being one of the big barriers to colleges coming back in September. Students at colleges and apprentices travel much more than they would do going to school. There is not a statutory requirement to provide support. Railway companies, bus companies and others have an important role and I am hoping we will



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see much more joined-up work on that front between now and early September when colleges come back. Transport is critical in both urban and rural areas and we do not want postcodes deterring people's ambition.

**Q835 Ian Mearns:** In answering the very first question the Chair asked you, I think you both mentioned the importance of potential students for FE and training providers getting access to impartial advice and guidance in their current settings. We now have the FE Commissioner and the Chief Executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships. What are you two going to do about it? Are you going to have a conversation with the National Schools Commissioner, the Minister for Schools, the HMCI, who inspects schools, about the importance of impartial advice and guidance?

**Richard Atkins:** This is a very longstanding issue. In a previous life a very long time ago I was the head of careers at an 11 to 18 secondary school and the issue seemed to exist then. Schools are quite academic places. They are very successful at what they do, but they seem to struggle to prioritise apprenticeships and technical education and the careers advice that goes with it. I never miss an opportunity when I am with Ministers or officials to promote not just apprenticeships but the whole technical education and training agenda to those in the school sector to make sure it has sufficient priority. As a country, I think we still have some way to go.

**Q836 Ian Mearns:** But the difference is that now we have the Baker clause, that makes it a legal requirement for access to those schools. Given that changed landscape, possibly an official letter from you, Richard, and from you, Jennifer, to the relevant bodies?

**Chair:** To intervene on that, do you help the FE colleges work with local schools to encourage them to promote further education and skills, both of you?

**Richard Atkins:** That is not very directly my role, but I would always do it. At the two colleges of which I was a principal, that was very much a focus: building relationships with schools, head teachers, heads of careers to make sure that went on. We heard from the learners earlier. I remember inviting the HMCI to my college and we had a similar conversation where we asked apprentices and students how much careers advice they had had and the answer was that they did not find out a lot about it until they were close to leaving school.

**Jennifer Coupland:** I think the key thing here, Robert, is that we have the right building blocks in place with the Baker clause and making sure that when Ofsted is inspecting schools it is looking at the provision of careers advice and guidance. I think what we need to do now is think a bit more in policy terms about how you make that bite, what are the incentives or the penalties for schools of not doing it properly. As Richard said, this has been a longstanding issue.



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We now have a legal basis to enforce access for colleges into schools to talk to students about apprenticeships and other technical education and to make sure that they are getting a rounded offer, but we are still in a situation, as we heard from the apprentices earlier, that it is a pretty mixed bag of how much information, advice and guidance people have had about apprenticeships when they are choosing their options. Luckily, people still seem to be able to find out about them, but it would be great if they were getting some more formal, structured advice and the quality of what they were getting was more regular and as good as the information they get about other choices like university, for example.

**Q837 Ian Mearns:** Isn't the real problem though, Jennifer, that the incentive for schools not to allow that access is that they have a bums on seats funding regime that funds pupils in sixth forms? That is the big incentive for them not to allow access, because they want to keep as many as they possibly can.

**Jennifer Coupland:** I have heard that as well.

**Q838 Ian Mearns:** Richard, you were talking about the financial integrity of colleges and the survivability of colleges. I have had a local problem here in Gateshead, as you are probably aware. Is there not an issue for you as the FE Commissioner to have a much greater oversight of the accounts and the audit reports relating to FE colleges?

**Richard Atkins:** I wish the audit reports could flag these things up, but they tend not to. I will not go into the situation in your local college.

**Ian Mearns:** I understand that.

**Richard Atkins:** There are some issues in a number of colleges. The funding is quite complicated for colleges. There are four or five different funding routes. They are all relatively short term and they are quite complex. If a finance director or a key member of staff chooses to shield some of that information from the governing body, for example, or from external scrutiny, things can escalate very fast and the college can get into serious trouble. All my words to the sector are to be cautious and seek advice and help. Do not sit there trying to do it all yourself. When things get difficult, call on us or on others from outside to have a look at what the situation is. Do not wait until a problem becomes a crisis. We have had two principals in the sector wait for a problem to become an acute crisis before I could get involved.

**Chair:** Could I just interrupt you, sorry? Jennifer, we still have problems with your line, so what I suggest is that we are going to have to have another session with you. It is very hard to hear you and we will call you back for another session, because we have to finish just after 11.30 am today. I am sorry, but it is interrupting the other lines. Thank you and we will have a serious session with you either before the recess or just after. We might send you a series of questions as well.



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**Jennifer Coupland:** That is fine. I am sorry this has not worked out as well as it might have done today, Robert.

**Chair:** Thank you. Do not worry, these things happen and I appreciate the work that you and your organisation do. We will have a serious questioning session at some point in the near future. Thank you.

Richard, please. Sorry, now you are on the spot. It is just going to be you, I am afraid.

**Richard Atkins:** It has felt like that for a while, Robert. Ian, as a principal I welcomed very much the incorporation of colleges and the degree of autonomy I had because I felt it gave me the flexibility to respond to my local community and local employers with my governors and management team. Clearly if you give people autonomy and independence, with some people—a minority—in any sector in this country you will get examples of poor governance or poor leadership. We certainly have that in the FE sector. I do not think we are unique. We may have a bit more of it than in other sectors and there are a number of reasons why. As soon as I can get into colleges, my emphasis—and it has been in the north-east—is to ensure stability for learners, to ensure that there are key interim staff in place and that the teaching staff can concentrate on what they do very well indeed.

Q839 **Ian Mearns:** Richard, you said about the quality of audit reports not highlighting where there is a problem. That is a problem in itself if auditors are not picking up what is in the accounts.

**Richard Atkins:** I could not comment any further than to say that the audit regime in further education has not proven to be a particularly consistent or accurate way of identifying financial problems before they occur.

Q840 **Chair:** I am looking at the Government website that describes your role and it says that your role is intervention and leadership and oversight. My concern is that when we asked you about the careers and pastoral care that colleges do, you said, "It is not my prob, guv, I am not strictly to do that". Surely in a leadership role, the important role that you have as FE Commissioner, if you went around the country demanding that schools promoted FE and skills and adhere to the Baker clause and supported FE colleges and made vociferous interventions about pastoral care, as I think Kim asked, it would make a difference. Surely leadership is your role, as is described from the Government website, rather than just saying, "These are not my issues".

**Richard Atkins:** I do not think I said "not my problem". I acknowledged the fact earlier that careers—

**Chair:** You said, "It is not my responsibility".

**Richard Atkins:** It is not my responsibility to report on those and to assess the quality of it and report publicly. That is Ofsted. But in my leadership role I would certainly encourage any college, in the reports we



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write for particular colleges, that building strong relationships with local schools and providing strong tutorial systems is critical. One of the things I said earlier in my answers was how impressed I was by the tutoring that colleges put in place online, how good they were at following up those that were not participating or were absent from classes during this lockdown period, and I have been incredibly impressed by the pastoral system.

**Q841 Chair:** How many schools have you chased or checked up on with Ofsted for not following the Baker clause supporting FE?

**Richard Atkins:** I have not been asked to intervene in the school system.

**Q842 Chair:** No, but you, as a leader in a leadership role, could write to the schools. Working with the Academies Commissioner, given your passion for FE, you could have contacted the schools themselves and worked out those schools that are not doing it and said, "This is not on. I am the FE Commissioner. This is your local college. They have to come into the school and you have to teach kids about apprenticeships". Could you not have done that?

**Richard Atkins:** I am very happy to take that forward as an idea. I certainly have not had the time and capacity or distinctly had that role, but that is a really good idea, Robert, and I am happy to take that away as a proposal.

**Q843 Chair:** You would make a difference. This is not meant to be a criticism. It is meant to be a recognition of the personal charisma that you have and your commitment to FE. You could make a massive difference to what goes on with schools supporting FE colleges.

**Ian Mearns:** If I can make a humble suggestion to Richard in his role as the FE Commissioner, given his leadership role, I think a letter from him to the National Commissioner for Schools and to the Schools Minister to remind them of their responsibilities in this respect would be important.

**Chair:** Rather than you just abiding strictly by the conditions that are set out in your role, proactive support for FE and apprenticeships and schools and careers would make a real difference.

**Richard Atkins:** I hear that. To be honest, I would like to communicate more often with both the sector and publicly. I will take away the observations that you have made, Chair, and other members of the Committee and hopefully I can act on them.

**Chair:** If you could write to us about what you intend to do, that would be helpful.

**Richard Atkins:** I am very happy to do that.

**Q844 David Johnston:** Richard, you may feel you have said what you want to about this in your other answers because you have touched on it, but we have been asking all witnesses this. What do you think the impact of



lockdown has been on the most disadvantaged students and apprentices?

**Richard Atkins:** That concerns me the most. I mentioned earlier that Level 1 learners, for example, and some of the more vulnerable learners were the least likely to engage in online learning. We know that from the evidence we have seen. We know the difficulties families have had with one computer and lots of young people in the house and so on. There have been some real difficulties and I worry very much about the learners who have been out of learning for months. That is why I am so keen that colleges open in September.

As I say, virtually all colleges have been open since June and providing a service. I am very impressed by the ones who have invited every vulnerable learner in for a meeting, for a tutorial in the last six weeks. I know that has been going on in lots of colleges in order to find out what they have been doing, what the plans are for next year to try to provide some continuity. I think next year colleges will have a real challenge with learners coming back who have been out for some time. The most important thing is to get learners back into class, back into learning in September in a structured and supported way.

There may well be mental health implications for some of those learners. I completely agree with the question that was raised earlier. Colleges are very aware of that and they are excellent at providing and they have very strong links with the NHS mental health services, but that clearly is a concern. I particularly worry about SEN learners. As you know, colleges have been involved in SEN activity for about 30 years. A large number of students with learning difficulties and disabilities choose to go to their local FE college. They are often funded by the local authority. There are various players in this. I think lockdown has made that difficult. I am particularly keen that local authorities guarantee the funding for the appropriate learners as early as possible so that colleges can plan for the intake of those learners. They may be physically disabled or have mental challenges.

Q845 **David Johnston:** I completely agree with you about mental health and SEN, but more broadly what additional things do you think we should see colleges doing and what role will you play in making sure they are doing so?

**Richard Atkins:** I think my role is to promote best practice, to share best practice, to encourage colleges, where we are involved, to take forward our recommendations. We are not involved in all colleges other than to share through the leadership, as Robert described, best practice because colleges are independent and autonomous. Some of them guard their independence very jealously, but we always remain open to invitations to work with or visit or provide free consultancy to any college. We will be sharing best practice and encouraging colleges we work with to work very hard to reengage and support the sorts of learners I have just described.



Q846 **David Johnston:** How would you say we should judge whether colleges do a good job of mitigating the impact of lockdown? What measures do you think we should use on that?

**Richard Atkins:** We should see what the Ofsted report on online learning tells us about the quality of the online learning. I think it will have been mixed, inevitably, possibly institution to institution or indeed subject to subject. We need to learn from that so that we share best practice.

We have just launched the CCF, the College Collaboration Fund. It is heavily oversubscribed. Lots of colleges have bid. The majority of colleges have bid. We set that up, like the previous fund, for colleges to collaborate with each other in small groups, ideally within a region. The majority of those proposals have been around sharing online learning best practice and supporting vulnerable learners. They have been among the key topics that have come forward and we are in the middle of judging those proposals. We have a fund of about £5.5 million to distribute. As with all funds, I would like it to be more than that. I think colleges collaborating and sharing best practice is the best way of improving. Colleges are distinctly different to schools and universities and training providers. It is a small community, 242 incorporated colleges. I think sharing best practice within that community is one of the best ways of improving practice.

Q847 **Tom Hunt:** What kind of support package do you envisage the Government making to support skills education and what will your role be in that?

**Richard Atkins:** I have to be careful. An announcement is expected today. I welcome the increase in traineeships that was announced earlier in the week. I think traineeships are an important building block in the jigsaw. I welcome what I read on the BBC website this morning about a scheme for young people to go into work placements and employers incentivised to offer those. I have been in this work and this activity during previous economic downturns and I know how critically important it is to get 16 and 17 year-olds into employment as fast as possible so that they learn the generalities of employment. We all know the research tells us that if you are a NEET for two months you are most likely to be a NEET for at least over a year. I am hoping the Government will do more there and I am hoping there will be incentives for employers to take on apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are jobs; employers choose apprentices, not providers.

Q848 **Chair:** I just had an FE principal who I hugely respect write to me. If I could quote the FE principal, she asks, "How do the team give colleges, the organisation or campus capacity to rebuild? It seems we have an overly complex regulatory and intervention regime. This is sometimes couched as supportive, but in effect adds significant bureaucracy, which sucks capacity from the system. Switching to a support and resilience focus may gain more rapid improvement". What is your answer to that,



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please?

**Richard Atkins:** Using my 21 years of experience as a principal and the 160-odd colleges I have visited in this role—and we have worked with well over 100—I would say that all systems could be improved. I believe that currently if a college is doing well, it has very little regulation. When I was running a college I did not see many regulators other than Ofsted who came and inspected the college. Clearly if one gets into difficulty it may be through no fault of the principal or individual and there is a need for support. I think the sources of that support are fairly clear. The local ESFA team and our team offer support and I can assure you that my work is far more about support than it is about intervention.

Q849 **Chair:** What do you do to try to cut through the spaghetti, as the principal described, of an overly complex regulatory and intervention regime? They are at the coalface. They would not make it up.

**Richard Atkins:** I am pretty close to the coalface and have been there for a long time. I think there are overcomplex aspects to the funding and regulation of FE colleges. Just look at the individual learner record and the complexity about the ILR that drives the funding in a college. That is very complex. When you talk about regulation and oversight—

Q850 **Chair:** Sorry, can you explain the ILR for those who do not know the acronyms, please?

**Richard Atkins:** The individual learning. It is a piece of software. For every learner in a college, and all colleges will have thousands of learners, some will have tens of thousands of learners, it is a complex piece of software with well in excess of 100 fields in it. You need to get that spot-on correct in order to draw down funding for a whole variety of sources. That is complex and some of the regulation that goes with it.

I think the oversight and regulation is less complicated. When you receive this funding, which is very complicated, you then have Ofsted who come and inspect you on a cycle and it seems to me that is quite a reasonable thing to ask. You have an ESFA local territorial team that, if you begin to face challenges, will come and ask you and offer you support initially. My team, through diagnostic assessment and offering a voluntary “call us up” service, is able to go in unpublished, private and offer consultancy. I do not see that as hugely—I think there are many other aspects.

I saw the AoC’s evidence to your Committee and I agree there are many aspects of further education colleges that are very heavily regulated. The complexity of putting together the costed curriculum plan and an annual budget is very complicated. I do not see oversight and inspection as being hugely overbearing and the situation has not changed very much from when I stopped doing it three or four years ago. Clearly if one gets into challenging territory the level of intervention increases, but I think the taxpayers would expect that, Robert. If you are investing tens of millions of pounds in a college, if things get serious—



Q851 **Chair:** Got it, thank you. I know we have spoken about the apprenticeship guarantee, and the Prime Minister has said that every young person will be offered an opportunity guarantee, either an apprenticeship or training, but what needs to happen in order to help colleges achieve that? When we get Jennifer in we will ask her these questions as well.

**Richard Atkins:** I can relate to the opportunity guarantee that the Prime Minister has talked about, where there is a place on an apprenticeship or a traineeship or a place in a further education college or a job. I think it is essential that we seek to fulfil that. There is no reason why colleges will not be working hard to fulfil that because, first, they want to recruit more 16 to 18 year-olds as full-time students and, secondly, they want to help employers recruit apprentices. To quote one of the members of the Committee earlier, colleges are funded per student and therefore their motivation to recruit more students is very high. I know that they will have the values that I share in the sector, which is that we want to provide a place for every single learner, ideally aged between 16 and 24, to be honest with you, who is need of a training, whether that be a full-time place or an apprenticeship.

I hope there are more apprenticeships than we expect and the employers take more on and there are incentives to help. If there are, I suspect some of those young people will fall back on colleges as full-time students, but I worry most about the NEETs. I have worked with NEETs personally in previous economic downturns and I worry. But I believe colleges will strive very hard, working alongside Jobcentres and everybody else, to ensure that there is a guarantee that will be in place and that everybody who wants it—and indeed colleges will reach out in order to offer places on programmes at a whole variety of levels so that young people are not NEET.

Q852 **Chair:** Thank you. Can I make an observation? You know that I am a fan of yours. As I said, I was very pleased that you got the job as FE Commissioner, but I think the message from the questioning from the Committee as a whole is not just that you do your statutory duties—which I think personally you do very well—but you think out of the box. The leadership role is incredibly important and help on careers and other things that may not be statutory, but you—as you say, you have been at the coalface of FE—given your personal charisma, perhaps could make a real difference to the way people see FE and skills in this country. It is just an observation, not just that you do your statutory roles, but also that you think laterally out of the box with ideas, particularly as so many of the colleges are going to come out of the coronavirus and it has been very tough for everyone.

**Richard Atkins:** Thank you. I welcome all that feedback and the proposals and I will write to the Committee. I recognise everything you said except the words “personal charisma”.

**Chair:** You do. I am sorry the broadcasting did not work with you,



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Jennifer, but again, I have huge respect for what you do and I very much enjoyed reading your interview and profile in *Times Higher Education*. I learnt quite a lot about you. We look forward to having you back with a working line, but these things happen in the age of everything being done on Zoom or whatever it may be. Thank you for the work you do. Thank you to all your staff, Richard, and everyone at FE, wishing them health and safety, thanking them for what they have done during the coronavirus and, Jennifer, of course thanking all the staff at IfATE and all the work they have done to keep things going during the pandemic. It is hugely appreciated. I wish you all well. We will now go to Prime Minister's Questions and then hopefully look at the skills package that the Chancellor is offering this afternoon. Every good wish to you. Thank you.