

2014 JOB-ROUNDS REFERENCES CONFERENCE SKILLS PARTY AND FE



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FE Week

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The last party conferences before a general election are always built upon a particular theme.

With the helm of the country up for grabs, the season can often be about last minute, ill-thought-through announcements, huge gaps in policy and unanswered questions about how, who and where.

This year's circus has been no exception to the rule, and FE and skills has in some instances been left more confused as to the policies of the three main political parties than enlightened.

This year was *FE Week's*, and indeed my, first foray into the coverage of all party conferences and I suspect it won't be our last. FE has benefited from being in the spotlight this year, but it's our job to make sure that doesn't fade once the election has been fought in May.

In the first few pages of this supplement, we will focus on the various announcements of policy to have come out of the conferences, with coverage in chronological order. From Labour's pledge to bring apprenticeships and university starts into line to David Cameron's pledge to create 1m new apprenticeships and Vince Cable's apprenticeship minimum wage rise, we have broken it all down for you, with analysis and reaction, on pages three, four and five.

As well as reporting on all the breaking news from the conference settings of Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow, *FE Week* also ran a fringe event at each of the three conferences in partnership with OCR, and reports from each of these events can be found between pages six and 13.

Finally, we gave the last word to the politicians themselves, with expert pieces

contributed by Skills Minister Nick Boles, his Shadow Liam Byrne and a rare insight from Business Secretary Vince Cable, together on pages 14 and 15 along with analysis from resident *FE Week* expert Mick Fletcher.

Hopefully we can help you wade through the posturing, empty promises and rhetoric and give you a picture of what life in FE and skill might really be like under following next May's election.



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Advertorial

School leavers lack the level of skill for industry



Charlotte Bosworth,
 Director of Skills
 and Employment

A recent report by the IET (Institute of Engineering & Technology) highlighted the need for education and businesses to work more closely together to fill the skills void. The report identified an issue many of us have been trying to address for a while – that school leavers lack sufficient levels of numeracy and literacy before entering the industry.

OCR absolutely agrees with the proposition that there needs to be more joined-up thinking between business and education, whatever the sector. We should be looking at how the education system can meet the needs of

businesses and we believe there are a number of key areas to this.

Firstly, there needs to be greater encouragement for more learners to participate in STEM subjects by looking at them from a holistic teaching standpoint and not just isolated subject areas, and to appreciate how a combined approach to learning can dramatically improve performance, attitudes and grades.

We also need to markedly raise the profile of employment openings that exist for learners from a STEM background and the desire from blue chip employers to fill well rewarded and stimulating career vacancies. We must provide engaging topics that link back to industry too.

From the education sector's side specifically, we need to make sure every young person masters a range of core subjects, including maths and English, to an adequate level so they can progress in their studies and in wider life.

We should also consider the 'enabling subjects' such as humanities, languages, arts, technical and practically based subjects that expand and enhance the core subjects. These equip a young person to move on – either to university, an apprenticeship or vocational qualification. Finally and some argue most importantly, are the behaviours and attitudes a young person must foster. It should be part of our vision to make sure businesses are supplied with compelling, confident, useful individuals.



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PROMISES, PROMISES — THE THREE MAIN PARTIES' PLEDGES FOR FE AND SKILLS

How the policy announcements from party conference season stack up



Stefan Rousseau/PA Wire

LABOUR

The Labour Party conference was held in Manchester from September 20 to 24. FE and skills featured in speeches by party leader Ed Miliband, Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt and Shadow Business Secretary Chuka Umunna, with a pledge on apprenticeship numbers the main headline announcement.

- Apprenticeship starts to be brought in line with university starts by 2025
- Minimum two-year duration for apprenticeships
- Increase in the national minimum wage to £8, meaning the apprentice rate would rise to £3.36 per hour
- Improved technical education

CONSERVATIVES

Birmingham played host to the Conservative Party Conference from September 27 to October 1. As with Labour, a big announcement on apprenticeships was previewed before Prime Minister David Cameron made his keynote speech. Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith also made an announcement about careers education.

- 1m new apprenticeship starts in the next parliament — total to hit 3m by 2020
- Extra money for apprenticeships by removing work-related benefits from 18 to 21-year-olds who fail to find a job
- Extension of the National Citizen Service to "every 16 and 17-year-old" in England
- Jobcentre Plus staff to work with school pupils from the age of 15 to improve careers advice



Chris Radburn/PA Wire

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

The Liberal Democrats returned to Glasgow for their conference between October 4 and 8. Although the party chose not to join the "apprenticeship numbers race," skills featured prominently in the speeches of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and Business Secretary Vince Cable.

- Increase in the apprentice minimum wage, from £2.73 to £3.79 per hour
- Ring-fencing of the education budget "from cradle to college"
- Expansion of the apprenticeships programme, with an emphasis on higher-level apprenticeships
- Discount of two thirds off transport to college or other institutions for 18 to 21-year-olds



Danny Lawson/PA Wire

Conferences spark apprenticeship numbers war

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The 2014 party conference season saw the start of an “apprenticeship numbers war” — prompting concerns that quality could be at stake for the benefit of quantity.

An early announcement by Ed Miliband before Labour’s conference began in Manchester was the starting gun in a race that would propel apprenticeships once again into the national headlines, but not necessarily for the right reasons.

Mr Miliband launched conference season with the announcement that his party would, if it formed a government, bring apprenticeship and university starts into line.

“Lots of the people I meet who are on apprenticeships say ‘my school said apprenticeships were rubbish and they wouldn’t help me but now I’m doing it, it’s really great for me,’” he said.

“Frankly there aren’t enough of them and they aren’t high-quality enough.

“So our fourth national goal is that by 2025 as many young people will be leaving school or college to go on to an apprenticeship as currently go to university.

“Now, I’ve got to tell you this is an

absolutely huge undertaking. We are such a long way away from this as a country. It is going to require a massive national effort. It’s going to require young people to show the ambition to do well and to get on.

“It’s going to require schools to lead a dramatic change in education, with new gold standard technical qualifications. And it is going to need business and government to lead a revolution in apprenticeships.”

On the face of it, the target seems ambitious, but it might not be. Number-crunching by *FE Week* expert Mick Fletcher shows that compared to an under-24 university start rate of around 300,000, apprenticeship starts for 16 to 24s is already at around 283,000.

But the numbers need to be clarified, as Labour’s plan to introduce a two-year minimum duration for apprenticeships and abolish programmes below level three would make the target a lot more ambitious.

Next, it was the Tories’ turn to tell the country what they will do if they keep the keys to Number 10 in May.

In a very obvious bid to turn the tables on Mr Miliband’s accusation that they had been “rubbish” on apprenticeships, the Conservatives chose an announcement that not only promoted the government’s record on starts, which are expected to hit 2m in

this Parliament, but set out a clearer target.

Mr Cameron’s pledge to increase starts to 3m, effectively increasing starts by 1m in the next Parliament, will be seen as a clearer, bolder statement than Mr Miliband’s, but it has also sparked concerns about the impact of focusing on quantity, rather than quality.

The Prime Minister said: “With us, if you’re out of work, you will get

Chris Radburn/PA Wire



David Cameron addresses the Conservative party conference

unemployment benefit, but only if you go to the Job Centre, update your CV, attend interviews and accept the work you’re offered.

“As I said, no more something-for-nothing, and look at the results. 800,000 fewer people on the main out-of-work benefits.

“In the next five years we’re going to go

further. You heard it this week – we won’t just aim to lower youth unemployment, we aim to abolish it.

“We’ve made clear decisions. We will reduce the benefits cap, and we will say to those 21 and under. No longer will you have the option of leaving school and going straight into a life on benefits. You must earn or learn.

“And we will help by funding three million apprenticeships.

“Let’s say to our young people: a life on welfare is no life at all, instead, here’s some hope; here’s a chance to get on and make something of yourself.”

Questions have also arisen over Mr Cameron’s pledge in his speech that the National Citizen Service would be made available to all 16 and 17-year-olds over the course of the next Parliament.

But the Tory party has admitted that the money for the expansion of the project will have to be found within existing budgets, and that it has only planned for attendance figures up to 150,000 in 2016, the same number budgeted for in 2015.

Whether deliberately or accidentally, the Liberal Democrats managed to avoid joining the race, and Business Secretary Vince Cable was perhaps sensibly vague about a proposed expansion of higher

Danny Lawson/PA Wire



Business secretary Vince Cable

apprenticeships.

One thing he was clear on, however, was his proposal for a minimum wage rise for apprentices. He announced he had written to the Low Pay Commission to recommend the rate rises to fall in line with the minimum for 16 and 17-year-old workers — currently £3.79 — a rise of almost 40 per cent.

Dr Cable said: “Nowhere is a long term perspective more necessary than in educating our population for a competitive, knowledge economy.

“That is why I was determined from day one of our government to breathe life back into apprenticeships and into adult education. I drew on the inspiration of my parents, who left school at 15 to work in factories and who got on in life through

vocational education and adult learning.

“In government we have launched almost 2m apprenticeships — a quantum leap in ambition — and we are now reforming them to improve quality and employability. And I want to see apprenticeships properly valued. So today I am proposing a £1 an-hour increase in the minimum wage for all first year apprentices and I am writing to the Low Pay Commission to put this in place.”

Dr Cable also used his speech to call for an expansion of higher-level apprenticeships and community learning.

He said: “I want to see a big expansion in degree level advanced apprenticeships which end the false apartheid between academic and vocational education; and a big expansion of community adult education including helping the mentally ill to be properly integrated back into society.”

The minimum wage rise proposal has been cautiously welcomed by most sector bodies, but the Confederation of British Industry and Association of Employment and Learning Providers have been quick to warn that any sharp rise in the rate could put employers off running apprenticeship programmes altogether.

DAVID HUGHES

Chief executive of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (Niace)



The Niace vision and ambitions for lifelong learning have received strong support at all three of the main Whitehall Party Conferences.

The bigger challenge is how it might happen and how it might be paid for

It’s not been hard to reach agreement with politicians, advisers and supporters that we need to improve education, learning and skills for people of all ages in order to secure a sustainable and fair economic recovery.

The bigger challenge is how it might happen and how it might be paid for.

There is some agreement across the parties worth highlighting. All agree that we need more apprenticeships, that youth unemployment must be a priority,

that growth in higher education over the last decade must be secured for the long-term, that poor levels of literacy and numeracy (at any age) need urgent actions and that the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and others is still too pervasive.

However, what’s missing is an overarching vision for lifelong learning, uniting education at all ages and at all stages of life as well as bringing together thinking on employment, health, citizenship, tolerance, economic growth and immigration.

Our manifesto call for a commission to set a long-term vision has really hit home with many, in fact people are now talking about the need for a Royal Commission to set the long-term vision and policy for education. This would galvanise cross-party support as well as the social partnership we need, helping to establish how progress can be made and how it will be paid for.



STEWART SEGAL

Chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers

We have welcomed the recognition of the contribution that apprenticeships can make to young people’s prospects and their value to the economy as a whole. Both the Conservative and Labour leaders included the increase in apprenticeships in their speeches and tried to outbid each other in driving the programme forward.

It is great to see the drive to expand the programme but we have cautioned against the chasing of substantial volume targets if it puts at risk the quality of the programme. On the issue of encouraging more employers to offer apprenticeships, we believe that any move away from mandatory cash contributions would remove one of the major threats to the engagement of business but we also have concerns about the other funding proposals.

Resisting perhaps the temptation to follow the Conservatives and Labour

in talking up programme volumes, the Business Secretary Vince Cable told the Liberal Democrat conference that he wanted ‘to breathe life’ back into apprenticeships by improving their quality and employability.

Dr Cable also promised a big expansion in degree level higher apprenticeships to ‘end the false apartheid between academic and vocational learning’. His headline proposal was the creation of a single national minimum wage for 16 to 17-year-olds in work and first year apprentices. This would involve their wages rising from £2.73 to £3.79 an hour on current rates.

We are currently developing our own response to the Low Pay Commission and many apprentice training providers believe that there is some justification for a significant increase in the apprentice rate. But the apprentice rate should not be increased to the point where it adversely affects employer recruitment.



LYNNE SEDGMORE

Executive director of the 157 Group

It was very pleasing indeed to see the importance of vocational education and skills underlined during the party conference season. References in all three main party leaders’ speeches really do indicate that FE’s time has come. It makes the next seven months all the more important for us, as we seek to influence the detail of policy proposals.

The ‘apprenticeship numbers race’ is something of a red herring, however welcome the attention is on getting employers engaged with the skills system. A race for quantity must not be allowed to happen at the expense of quality, and we must ensure that apprenticeships do what they are intended to do — to pave the way for a new job.

And the focus on apprenticeships could mean that we risk forgetting entirely the rest of our vocational offer — wherever it is delivered. The fact remains that apprenticeships are not the route most people will take to developing high-level

technical skills, and we will continue to push for whole swathes of people doing vocational programmes in colleges not to be overlooked.

The Lib Dem promise to ringfence funding to include colleges is, therefore, very promising — it implies that they may be looking more broadly than just at apprenticeships. And the ministerial backtracking on Functional Skills is, of course, very welcome. We in FE have always known, to quote him, that “some people’s brains are wired differently to others” and that simply making people retake GCSEs is likely to mean failure.

The noticeable shift in emphasis from both the Conservatives and Labour towards the broad curriculum and development of personal character will be interesting as it develops into policy. We hope it will extend into a serious attempt to tackle the perverse incentives in the system which lead to such poor careers education, among other things.



RICHARD ATKINS

President of the Association of Colleges and principal of Exeter College

It was the first time I have ever been to the party conferences, and I found it very interesting to go to all three. I think the first thing that hit me was the scale of the fringe was a lot bigger than I realised and for much of the time seemed more popular and more important than what was going on in the main hall.

I thought all the talk about apprenticeships was positive

I was pleased that we had at least two FE fringe events and I was pleased we had different offerings, and I thought all the talk about apprenticeships was positive in one sense, but I thought the promises that were made were unrealistic and not based on the facts as

to what’s going on now.

For the general public, apprenticeships get muddled up with youth unemployment and not being able to get enough plumbers, but they are more complex than that. I think we are in a good place at the moment, I think we have been right to introduce minimum standards, but I think the shortage is in higher-level apprenticeships and what we need is for more employers to offer them.

I took with me a small list of policy asks, things I wanted to get on the agenda. One was the expansion of technical and professional education at levels three, four and five. I thought there was quite a lot of interest from Labour and I was pleased at the Lib Dem conference to see interest in the [discounted] transport issue.

I think the three parties agree something needs to be done about careers education but I think they were sketchy with the detail.

Labour Learner focus and joined-up funding agencies among Labour promises

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An FE system focused on the learner, more joined-up thinking between funding agencies and a move towards a “know-how” economy were just some of the suggestions for policy if Labour win in 2015.

Experts from across the FE sector came together at the *FE Week* fringe event at the Labour Party conference in Manchester — and each one told a packed room full of delegates about their priorities for government were Ed Miliband to enter Number 10 as Prime Minister in May.

There’s this statistic I think we ought to focus on — we’ve still only got one-in-five employers actually taking on apprentices, so whatever means we use — and it’s interesting what’s been said about public procurement — well we did it. That’s why Crossrail has got nearly 400 apprentices. That’s why the Olympics had 300 apprentices. So it’s all that supply chain within them.

Lord Young, opposition front bench spokesperson in the House of Lords and former Skills Minister

Their comments followed a big announcement from Mr Miliband on apprenticeships, but also came in the face of widespread confusion about what Labour’s new policy might actually mean.

Tom Bewick, chief executive of the International Skills Standards Organisation (INSSO) and a former Labour adviser, was first to set out his three priorities for a Labour government in 2015, saying our economy needed to move from “knowledge to know-how”.

He said: “The first thing I wanted to say about where we are this week and [Shadow Education Secretary] Tristram Hunt’s speech about the forgotten 50 per cent is, let’s hope that in the next 10 years we can correct what has really been an issue that goes back, as you will know in this room, 150 years, when an MP called Bernhard Samuelson headed a commission on technical education and scientific instruction back in 1868.

“There’s a lot of Groundhog Day thinking around how we tackle this issue. In my view, and I spend a lot of my time working in many countries around the world, we’re not the only country that’s looking to tackle this issue, but I sum it up very simply as this: we’ve got to move our society and our economies from this notion purely



Tom Bewick, chief executive of INSSO

I think it’s quite interesting in terms of speakers actually, that FE is absolutely as people have been saying, a partnership between employers, individuals and providers. So interesting, that in your ‘what do we need in the manifesto’ there hasn’t actually been necessarily a voice from employers.

I’m quite interested in terms of gaps around a narrative that seems to sort of be sounding through, which is we need more investment, we want more autonomy, we don’t want qualifications, you know, so fair enough, there might be a logic to all of that, but where in that mix then comes, can people be assured of the quality of the training delivery?

Dinah Caine, Creative Skillset

of a knowledge economy to a know-how economy — we need both knowledge in our

economy and we need know-how.

“Three ideas for the Labour manifesto — the first is, we have to once-and-for-all level the funding playing field for post-compulsory education and training in this country — it’s far too iniquitous and it needs to be sorted out.

“Secondly, talk about devolution. In my book it’s not about just evolving from one set of politicians to another, we need genuine devolution of funding to employers and to individuals — and of course this was a great Labour idea 20 years ago, we need to bring back some form of safe, secure, individual learning accounts and see a more demand-driven system that way.

“And thirdly, I think — and I disagree actually with [Shadow Skills Minister] Liam Byrne in this, who seems to be fully confident in the current universities to deliver the new technical degrees and technical institutes — I would allow a challenge of technical universities to come in, and that would be our FE colleges.”

Charlotte Bosworth, director of skills and employment at awarding organisation

OCR, said a focus on the bigger picture, not just on qualifications, was needed.

She said: “I think what we have ended up with is a system that has become fixated on qualifications, whereas what we hear all the time is that actually, it’s those wider skills which are what is actually required by employers.

“We have ended up recently in a situation where qualifications, particularly academic qualifications, seem to be the answer for everything, and I would question that. I think the other thing that is becoming very clear to me with the people I actually talk to and interact with is, we have ended up with a very confused system as well.

“We have seen with lots of well-meaning politicians actually coming up with free schools, UTCs, studio schools, academies, instead of actually saying, ‘What do we have that already works and provides a successful solution?’

“And to me, I think that has been provided for many years by very good FE colleges.



Charlotte Bosworth, OCR



Lord Tony Young

I had a fantastic round-table about three months ago with most of the FE colleges who have particular focus on the maritime and the nautical area, and listening to some of the really good stuff that they’re doing, so I think it’s about also bringing out those other areas in government where skills and apprenticeships are key.

It’s not simply about BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills] or DfE [Department for Education], and actually, if you were to achieve some of the step changes that you want to achieve in terms of progression and lifelong learning, you need to be out there engaging with all of my colleagues in other front bench teams.

Gordon Marsden, Shadow Transport Minister and former Shadow Skills Minister

“Another thing that I would focus on is funding. We seem to see the SFA [Skills Funding Agency] have one idea, EFA [Education Funding Agency] have another — how can we make sure that starts coming together so we can provide a real solution that works not just for the young people going through the system, but those people that are also providing the solution as well.”

And Stewart Segal, chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), told the event that government needed to see FE from the learner’s point of view.

He said: “I think we need to see things from the customer’s perspective, particularly the young people.

“When you look at the system from their perspective, it looks really confusing, so it is a big job to be done on careers, lots of different government initiatives, when you look at it from a young person’s perspective it’s really confusing so we need to turn it around.

“Vocational versus academic, I’m not



Delegates at the fringe



Former Shadow Skills Minister Gordon Marsden

sure that’s a real versus, and my fear is at the moment, we are trying to make vocational qualifications more academic so we think they’re more rigorous. It’s about having a much wider perspective on that to date.

“Programmes for young people particularly, but all ages, particularly the unemployed — let’s concentrate on the programmes that work, such as traineeships, and make them work. Don’t reinvent the wheel and come up with new initiatives.

“I guess that sort of applies to Local Enterprise Partnerships. Our own view is to say there needs to be some national programmes that everybody understands and that can be enhanced at local level, and they can be involved in performance management — but let’s not get rid of the programmes that work.”

I want to re-emphasise this point about levels. The Association of Accounting Technicians [AAT] offers progressive qualifications through levels three and four, and in 2013, it had around 8,000 apprenticeships, and they were broadly evenly split between two, three and four. It’s a good qualification at level two that delivers real outcomes, and I would be concerned to see that disappear and the stepping stones need to be there to get through.

Nick Gash, AAT

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FE image 'not negative' - Minster

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Further Education does not have a “negative image,” Skills Minister Nick Boles said as he faced sector leaders at the Conservative Party Conference.

Mr Boles took questions at the *FE Week* fringe event at the conference in Birmingham, where he responded to concerns about funding cuts, apprenticeship reforms and the overall image of FE.

“We know that thousands and thousands of students in the UK struggle to make ends meet. Over 50 per cent of FE students can't meet their basic living needs, so their basic living expenses, based on the money they get maintenance allowance, so that's just rent, utilities and bills they can't cover.

So unless they can resort to the bank of mum and dad or work in jobs that are, as yet, not available, this is incredibly worrying for students who are trying to do better in their lives, trying to upskill to get into the labour market.

So what I would like to see is a single student finance system across FE and HE, that means no matter your circumstances, if you went into further education or higher education, you get the same level of support.

Toni Pearce, president, National Union of Students

His comments came after Prime Minister David Cameron promised to boost apprenticeship starts to 3m by the end of the next Parliament — but also announced that an extra £25bn of savings would be needed, some of which were bound to be borne by an



Skills Minister Nick Boles addresses the FE Week Fringe

unprotected FE budget.

At the fringe event, Mr Boles seemed keen to raise morale, and said he would help to “sell” the sector with the help of its leaders, but that a more positive attitude was needed.

He said: “Ultimately, if you want there to be a negative image for further education, the best way to achieve it is to

go out there and say, ‘oh, it's terrible such a negative image of FE’.

“There is not a negative image for FE. There is not a negative image for the idea of going out and getting some proper, tactical, professional, vocational skills to build a career and build a life. I don't have that sense of it, and I went down an incredibly snotty-nosed academic route where I learned almost nothing that I can use now in my daily work.

“So don't talk yourselves down. You talk yourselves down, but if you accuse us of talking you down, the general impression people will get is that you're defensive, that you're negative about yourselves. Be proud of what you do. You do terrific jobs.

“Almost every college I've been to, Prospects College in Essex, Heart of Worcestershire College — they were terrific. I was inspired. I had no idea this stuff was happening. Be proud, and sell it. You've all been involved in the sector and the opportunity to market it for rather longer than me, so let's get together as a team and go out and sell it, and not be defensive and talk ourselves down.”

David Hughes, chief executive of the National Institute of Adult Continuing

“However much progress we have made in FE in raising the profile, we've done nothing like enough. If we talk all the time about skills shortages, at the heart of that is a fundamental cultural deficit that we lack demand for vocational and in particular higher vocational education and training and that's a massive weakness.

This means, instead of talking this jargon about information, advice and guidance or narrowly about careers guidance, we should be talking in the broader sense about careers education, a change in the whole landscape around that, re-defining what function it plays.

David Cragg, deputy chair, Find a Future [which manages the Skills Show and UK entry into international skills competitions]

Education (Niace) said workforce development was not being targeted, despite statistics which showed that 13.5m jobs would need to be filled in the next decade, and just 7m young people were expected to enter the labour market.

He added: “It seems to me we've got to free up, at a local level, colleges and universities, third sector organisations, local authorities, to deliver something that works in terms of outcomes — not in terms of qualifications, but something about getting people into learning at the bottom end, getting people to engage in learning in the workplace, and getting people to progress into the jobs that will be there as the economy starts to grow, because there aren't enough young people coming through.

“The second thing is, we need much more focus on informal and community learning. We will not get to the one in six adults with poor literacy, the one in four with poor maths, unless we get into the community sector. There is not enough money going into that sector to deliver the informal, kind of first steps back into learning.

“The third thing is, the only way we



Delegates watch the proceedings



David Hughes of Niace

are going to tackle underachievement of children in schools — and there was a great piece of research that came out last week that said even in outstanding schools, the gap between the highest socio-economic

“The University and College Union [UCU] believes that apprenticeships should be of high quality, lasting a minimum of three years, and leading to a professional qualification or licence to practice.

We are concerned that, as apprenticeships are expended — as all the parties are promising to do that — opportunities for apprenticeships are equally available to all young people regardless of race and sex, and disabled young people are given meaningful opportunities to undertake apprenticeships with provision of reasonable adjustments if necessary.

Liz Lawrence, president, UCU

groups and the lowest remains at 25 per cent in terms of achievement at school.

“So even great schools can't cope with the family problems that exist, and we know that family learning works. It helps the parents, it helps the children, it cuts into that inter-generational malaise really that says learning isn't important, it's not for people like me.”

Funding was the theme of comments by Association of Colleges chief executive Martin Doel, who put pressure on the minister to fight against further cuts for colleges. Mr Doel used his speech to demonstrate the lack of parity of esteem between FE and other education sectors.

He said: “The golden ratio you need to remember from tonight is 5-4-8. That's £5,000 for every 11 to 16-year-old for the education, £4,000 for every 16 to 18-year-old, and over £8,000 for every student that goes to university — that's a 22 per cent differential between every 16 to 18-year-old in this country and 11 to 16-year-old.

“Pressure on the budget for the DfE [Department for Education] will get even greater whoever is in power after 2015,

as the demographic bubble which is now being seen at primary schools works its way through to secondary education, which is much more expensive, pressure on funding for 16 to 18-year-olds will gather even greater. “Somewhere between £4,000 and no thousand pounds, you cannot deliver a programme. There are no further cuts that can be made to 16 to 18 education.”

“I've been 35 years in FE and I've seen policy come and go, raining on us like confetti, and I don't mean this disparagingly, and throughout that message colleges have always been threatened or told they're not good enough, but you know what? Ministers have come and gone, policies have come and gone, wings of vanity projects have come and gone, and colleges are still here, doing a very, very good job.

Lynne Sedgmore, executive director, 157 Group



FE Week reporter Freddie Whittaker, Managing Director Shane Mann, Mr Boles and editor of FE Week sister newspaper Academies week Nick Linford

Royal Charter review plan wins Liberal Democrat backing

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The establishment of a “royal commission” on the future of learning and skills received the backing of Liberal Democrats as FE secured its place on the agenda once again.

The idea of a wide-ranging review of the sector was first mooted by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (Niace) chief executive David Hughes, and received the backing of senior Lib Dems, including presidential hopeful Lady Brinton, at the party’s conference in Glasgow.

We know that many students in FE really struggle to make ends meet. Our research said 30 per cent of all FE students had seriously considered leaving their course, and 50 per cent said they regularly worried about having enough money to meet basic living expenses. We urgently need to address the student support system so that opportunities are not just open to all, but meaningfully open to all.

The next thing is free bus travel for 16 to 19-year-olds. In many parts of the country the cost of transport is sky high, and getting higher all the time. For young people it’s often completely unaffordable. As this is no persistent offer of provision for young people, with some areas offering discount schemes while many others don’t, this definitely need addressing and we’re really glad that the Lib Dems have started to look at this.

Megan Dunn, vice president of the National Union of Students

In its policy document ‘Age Ready Britain’, the party has also committed to working with Niace to establish mid-life career reviews, and the idea of a royal commission also received the backing of the 157 Group at an *FE Week* fringe at the conference.

Andy Gannon, director of policy at the 157 Group, said: “I’m not sure in this debate we’re all talking the same language.

“When I talk about apprenticeships, I think of a part of a very broad vocational offer for lots and lots of people. Some people see them as a shiny, new solution to a youth unemployment problem. When I think about aspiration, I think about really good hairdressers as well as people going to university, so when I think vocational, I include lawyers and doctors.

“So my first ask is that we take stock.



David Hughes, Chief executive of Niace

It’s great that apprenticeships have become a political battleground – long may it continue. Everybody vying to be the champion. However, if any of those aspirations are going to be fulfilled, we need a sea change in public attitudes and a systemic change in our education system. We’ve got a cultural deficit – that’s why we’ve got the Skills Show. To actually start to really fix the thing, planning won’t fix it. I’ve been a planner, that won’t fix it, what will fix it is raising individual demand.

David Cragg, deputy chair of Find a Future and the Skills Show

We stop. We take some time to embed the recent changes and we review what we are actually trying to achieve as a society through our education system [and] David’s royal commission idea is one part of that.”

Mr Hughes told the fringe he was pleased to have Lib Dem backing for the establishment of such a commission.

He said: “There is one big solution that’s come through very strongly in this conference, and I’m really pleased

it’s in the Lib Dem manifesto, which is a royal commission which tries to set a long-term plan and vision for the policy around lifelong learning — not just the adult bit, not just the schools bit, but the whole of it, from early years, all the way through schools, FE, higher education and workforce, and critically does a couple of things.

“It makes sure that there is a much more flexible and creative set of offers for people at different ages and stages of their lives, it gives incentives to invest, from individuals and employers, because there won’t be enough government money to pay for all this, whichever government gets in, for at least the next 10 or 20 years and perhaps ever.

“And anyway, people paying for it as employers and individuals is a good thing, if they can afford to pay, the state picks up where people can’t. Critically, it says to people there’s not just one throw of the dice on education. You can come back into education at different times in order to get on in your life, and that might mean coming in at 50 or 60 because you’ve still got 20 or 10 years left of working life — that would be the royal commission’s job.”

Lee Dargue, Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate for Birmingham

Edgbaston and party education policy adviser, said: “With transport, we’re going to give two-thirds off, we can’t currently look at funding full 16 to 18 for free, but two-thirds off. Minimum wage is being increased, you might have seen that, by Vince.

I do think one of the great things this government has done is the extension of free school meals to the colleges. The amount of money is inadequate but we have to start somewhere when there isn’t a lot of money — £2.41 doesn’t buy you a full English, certainly not in my part of the world, never mind lunch, but what it has enabled us to do is to track the youngsters who were getting free school meals at school and for us to see whether are adding value to those students, so I am very keen on extending pupil premium and others, even if all the money isn’t available at once.

Richard Atkins, principal of Exeter College and president of the Association of Colleges

“Careers advice, we want to start it at early secondary and move it all the way through but not call it careers advice, as you said IAG, which includes life skills as well. Exams are centuries old, so we need to look at assessment. The student premium, we want to bring in for colleges, which will follow the pupil premium from schools into colleges and other FE.”

The fringe also heard from Gemma Gathercole, head of policy at OCR, who called for more stability for people in education.

She said: “Young people in year five in primary school at the moment are experiencing the new KS2 curriculum. Those young people won’t enter the workforce, if they enter it at 18, until 2023. Yet between now and 2023, education secretaries are likely to turn around and make changes to the education system.

“We’ve got to understand the system where if, we make a change, we’ve got to understand that change before we change it again. The trouble with education in politics is that a parliament is only five years, which is the time it takes someone to get through secondary school.

“That time is important for those young people to actually finish and go onto the next stage, and for us to understand the



Richard Atkins, president of the Association of Colleges

Shane Mann, managing director of LSECT publisher of *FE Week*

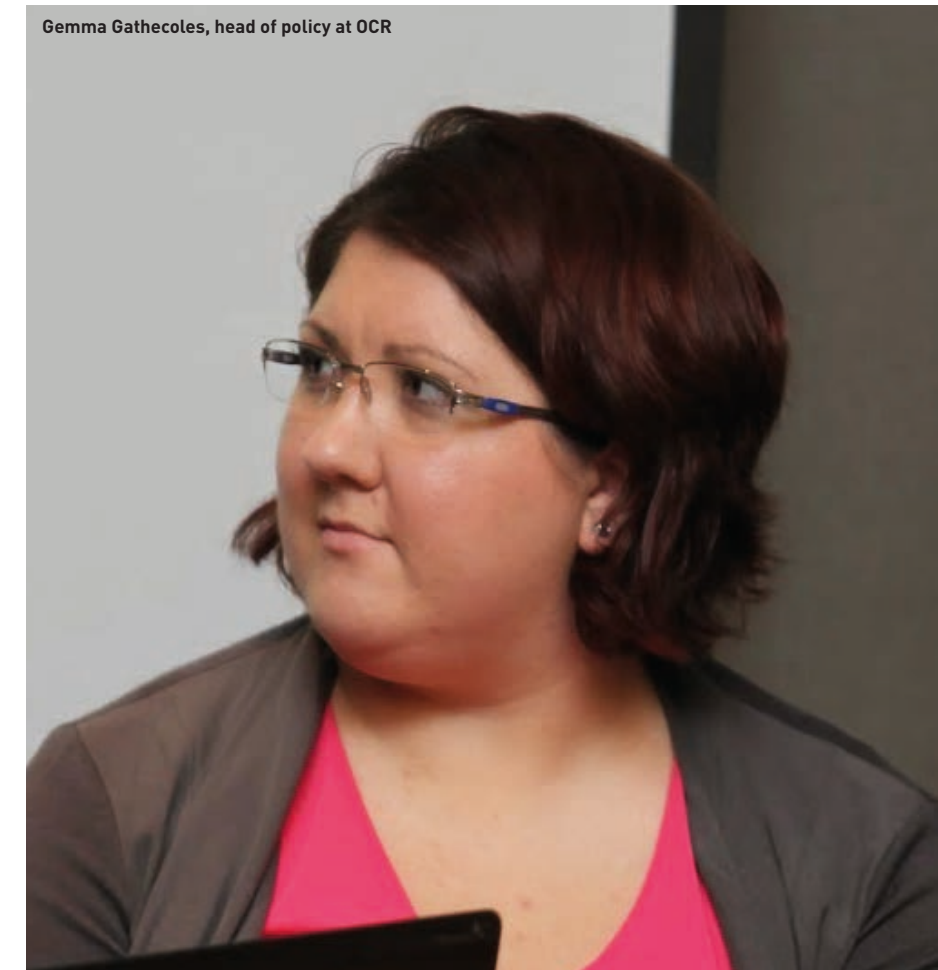
David Cragg, vice chair of find a future

impact that they have when they enter the workforce. The trouble with change with that in the interim is that you make a change based on information that is incomplete.”

I’ve got a few practical ideas, certainly in careers. Stop running ‘initiatives’. Every new government comes in and every time the minister changes there is a new initiative — it’s really difficult looking at it from a young person’s point of view. We counted, we got to 10 and stopped, because there is no initiative that has meant to help 16 to 19.

So stop doing those initiatives and give access to the young people and their parents, because I think we, the people who are delivering the post-16 programmes, are the only ones who can sell it to them. I don’t want Connexions back again because it would just fill the sixth forms.

Stewart Segal, chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers



Gemma Gathercole, head of policy at OCR



LIAM BYRNE
Shadow Skills Minister

‘Big reforms — not big spending’

Our education system needs to change if we are to set all young people up for the future and if we are to build the high skill, high wage economy we need to succeed as a country. We need to offer a clear, high quality vocational route right through education for young people wanting to pursue vocational and technical qualifications.

The next Labour government will end the culture that says the academic route is always best and vocational skills are second best, with radical reforms to our education and skills system to create a clear route for the forgotten 50 per cent of young people that do not currently go to university.

Ed Miliband has already set out measures to introduce a new gold standard vocational qualification – the tech bacc — for 14 to 19-year-olds, tackle poor standards in English and maths, raise the standard of FE colleges and radically improve the quality and quantity of apprenticeships.

Alongside the tech bacc, Labour will introduce new technical degrees as the pinnacle of this new gold standard vocational route, ensuring that young people that excel in vocational skills have opportunities to progress to high level training that sets them up for a career. Currently, just 2 per cent of apprenticeship starts are at degree level.

Our approach will give young people embarking on vocational education at 14 a clear line of sight through education and into a skilled career.

This forms a core pillar of One Nation Labour’s plans to mend the broken link between growth and living standards, so that we can earn our way to a better standard of living. This involves big reforms — not big spending — to address deep-rooted problems and create an economy that is made by the many, not just a few at the top.

We understand the power of FE and the key role it can play in creating an economy that is more inclusive. To fully maximise its potential, we must ensure that the quality of provision is of the highest standard across the board. Two thirds of 16 to 18-year-olds study in FE

colleges but the standard of education delivered in these colleges can be poor. In 2012/13 a quarter of learners were in FE provision that was judged less than ‘good’ by Ofsted. The number of inadequate FE providers increased from 34 to 41 over this period, and under this government FE lecturers aren’t required to hold a teaching qualification. Labour will turn around poor performing FE colleges

Our approach will give young people embarking on vocational education at 14 a clear line of sight through education and into a skilled career

by transforming our highest performing FE colleges into new ‘institutes of technical education’, with a core mission to provide high quality delivery of Labour’s tech bacc.

To gain this status colleges would need to demonstrate that they have specialist vocational teaching and expertise; high quality English and maths provision; and strong employer and labour market links. Only colleges granted Institute status will be able to deliver the tech bacc to ensure it is gold standard.

Going into 2015, our approach is about expanding young people’s choices, not restricting them.

There are currently very limited options for those that excel in vocational skills and wish to train for a specialist career. These pathways are not a priority for universities, because they have never been a priority for government. We need to address that by making new high level vocational degrees a priority for expansion and ensuring that everyone has the opportunities to succeed.



NICK BOLES
Skills Minister

Tough love to get off on the right foot

You’re only young once. Those first few years after school are unique and precious. Used well, they can set you up for an exciting, stretching and fulfilling career. Wasted, they can blight your future — leaving you unprepared for life’s challenges and ill-equipped to seize the opportunities that our dynamic and rapidly changing economy creates. So what determines whether a young person gets off onto the right foot, or the wrong one?

The first, essential precondition of making decent progress is a mastery of English and maths. Twenty years ago there were lots of unskilled jobs that could be done by people who were functionally illiterate or innumerate. No longer.

After six months on the new Youth Allowance almost all able-bodied people under the age of 21 will need to be in a job or on an apprenticeship or be doing daily community work to earn the money they receive from the taxpayer

With even the most mundane work requiring the use of basic communications technology like handheld scanners, English and maths are the passport, without which entry to the world of work is effectively barred. So the government is right to insist that young

people who haven’t achieved adequate mastery of English and maths at school should carry on studying it in some form after the age of 16 until they do.

Ideally, we would like them to retake their GCSEs and achieve a C grade, but we recognise that the structure and content of GCSEs may not work for everyone so we are also working with Ofqual to improve the quality and consistency of the Functional Skills qualifications so that they too become a valuable currency that is understood and respected by employers.

The second most valuable asset for a young person leaving school is technical or professional training, designed by an active employer and delivered alongside a real job. That’s not to deny the value of theoretical instruction or classroom learning in support of on-the-job training but when you are trying to acquire a set of technical or professional skills there is no substitute for practical experience working with people who are already past masters at the job.

That is why this government has invested so much in reforming apprenticeships and why David Cameron is determined to invest even more in apprenticeships if the Conservatives are re-elected, diverting money from benefits so we can create 3m high-quality apprenticeships in the lifetime of the next Parliament.

We do not think it helps any young person to tell them that spending more than six months on unemployment benefit is anything other than a very bad way to start their adult life. They need to be earning or learning — or both.

So a Conservative government will insist that after six months on the new Youth Allowance almost all able-bodied people under the age of 21 will need to be in a job or on an apprenticeship or be doing daily community work to earn the money they receive from the taxpayer.

Tough love it may be — but you only get one start in life and it’s our responsibility as adults to make sure that every young person sets off on life’s journey on the right foot.



VINCE CABLE
Business Secretary

A way forward in light of funding challenges

When it comes to our record of delivering skills in government, there is much to be proud of.

We are on target to support 2m apprentices over this Parliament. Colleges currently educate around 177,000 students at higher levels — offering many people the chance to live and study locally, and on a flexible, part-time basis.

And, in a major success for our international education strategy, UK education providers have just won four contracts worth £850m to establish 12 technical and vocational training colleges in Saudi Arabia.

There is also plenty of innovative provision — the construction school at Hull college, which I visited last year, whose apprentices refurbish derelict housing to provide accommodation for families on low incomes; the Aviation Academy at Leeds Bradford International Airport, offering qualifications from level two diplomas to a BSc in air transport management; and Gateshead College’s simulated work facility located on-site at Nissan.

When I came into office in 2010, the one specific spending cut already pencilled in was for FE and training.

Our higher education funding reforms not only strengthened the position of universities, but just as important, it freed up resources to support priority areas in FE such as basic skills and apprenticeships.

We have also invested in the FE estate to the tune of almost £1.7bn, enabling more than 1,000 constructions and refurbishment projects across the country worth in excess of £2.5bn.

Nonetheless, funding for colleges, unlike that for universities, has been under real pressure. So what should we do?

I am suggesting a number of ways forward — some new, others already in train.

First, we need to fill that high-level vocational gap. I have set out our vision for a new generation of national colleges, specialised institutions, acting as national centres of expertise, in key areas of the economy.

A second is to tackle the shortage of higher vocational skills. Higher apprenticeships are an important solution to the sub-degree gap, and there are already some superb

schemes, for which entry is as competitive as getting into Cambridge.

Third, we need to trust FE institutions more. In overseas vocational systems, colleges have the power, like UK universities, to devise their own programmes and award their own qualifications.

But in England, colleges are obliged to teach curricula handed to them by external awarding bodies, leaving little room to tailor provision to the needs of students or of their potential (or actual) employers. We need colleges with the power to decide what to teach and how.

We need colleges with the power to decide what to teach and how

National Colleges will be able to do precisely that — setting the standards for their own qualifications, which other colleges will also be able to offer.

We want excellent existing colleges to set their own qualifications too — and to be able to validate the programmes of their peers.

For example, Sir Tim Wilson recommended that when the opportunity to legislate arises, we should allow colleges with foundation degree awarding powers to accredit other foundation degree programmes. I agree with him.

I am determined that we boost the volume of higher apprenticeships sufficiently for them to become mainstream so that they are seen as an increasingly attractive rival to the university degree.

Our higher education and FE systems are outstanding, and I want as many people to benefit from it as possible, once they have the appropriate qualifications.

By tackling the sub-degree gap, by improving funding mechanisms, by changing popular attitudes, we can broaden choice for people and for the businesses who need capable staff.



MICK FLETCHER
Education consultant and visiting research fellow at the Institute of Education

There are fewer differences between the parties in relation to FE than the rather varied contributions to this *FE Week* conference supplement might suggest.

The key message however is that there are few big proposals from any of them and that doesn’t bode well.

It’s clear they don’t see FE promises as being major vote winners, which implies that after the election serious cuts can be made without too much fuss.

Apprenticeships are perhaps the exception to this rule.

Labour and the Conservatives have both announced headline-grabbing figures for increasing numbers, which

may or may not be ambitious depending upon what they choose to count as an apprentice.

The Lib Dems have focussed on increasing higher apprenticeships, which, given the very low starting point, is probably a target that’s difficult to miss.

If Labour sticks to its guns and only counts two-year programmes at level three and above as real apprenticeships then it faces an uphill struggle — requiring public sector contractors to take on apprentices may be a sensible move, but seems unlikely to treble the numbers, which is what is needed to equal the numbers entering higher education.

The fear is that in trying to achieve a step change in practice in England, a Labour administration would raid other parts of the FE budget to offer bribes to employers,

risking high dead weight costs as with Train to Gain.

Similarly, the Conservative pledge to deliver 3m apprenticeships over the lifetime of the parliament seems only attainable if regulations become less rather than more restrictive.

There are well-founded fears that this would lead quantity at the expense of quality; and there are already hints from Skills Minister Nick Boles (covered in *FE Week* dated October 6) that government might give way on requiring employers to pay a minimum cash contribution.

There is an interesting cross-party agreement on the need for more higher level skills and similar doubts about the capacity of existing colleges to deliver them.

The Coalition has just announced the HS2 college —

the first of a new generation of specialised technical institutions.

Business Secretary Vince Cable seeks to claim the idea for the Lib Dems with his vision of ‘national colleges’ but it is not clear how they differ from Labour’s proposal for ‘elite colleges’ or ‘Institutes of Technical Education’.

There is also no explanation from any of them why existing FE colleges, that already deliver lots of technical skills at levels three and four, should be by-passed in this way.

The two main parties are apparent converts to localism (the Lib Dems would claim that they had always sought devolution from Whitehall) but the danger is that they would transfer power to local authorities or local enterprise

partnerships from colleges, not from central government.

In his contribution to this paper Dr Cable talks of the need to trust colleges more; but apart from his new creations only ‘excellent colleges’ would be trusted to ‘decide what they teach and how’.

Shadow Skills Minister Liam Byrne on the other hand speaks of tackling the culture that sees vocational skills as second best; but unwittingly helps perpetuate that culture by yet again describing FE as a sector in need of further serious reform.

Mr Boles paints a much more limited picture of FE — he concentrates on young people who are not qualified in English and maths and those aged 18 to 21 who are not earning or learning.

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Cambridge Progression units can be used to support progression to GCSE or Functional Skills qualifications or as stand-alone units. In all cases you'll need to complete an Initial and Diagnostic Assessment at the start of the programme to identify the skills that each learner needs to address in order to progress to Level 2 qualifications. This is where we can help.

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