

**NCFE**

**NCFE 175<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY**

# **Sector Spotlight: Further Education**

October 2023

**SHAPING SMARTER LEARNING**

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# Foreword

By **Deborah Jenkins MBE DL**,  
Chair of the NCFE Board of Trustees

**Back when what is now NCFE was founded in 1848, change and revolution were sweeping through Europe and beyond. From France and Hungary to Brazil, people were rising up against rulers and deposing regimes.**

Garibaldi returned to Italy and started the military campaigns against the Austrian Empire which would lead to the reunification of Italy. Marx was fomenting revolution in Berlin, Paris and London.



**The North East of England was going through a golden age of industry..."**

The North East of England was going through a golden age of industry, growth, extraordinary new technology and scientific advancement. Mining, shipbuilding and engineering were booming, and architectural marvels were being built throughout the region's cities.

In Newcastle alone, William Armstrong opened his gigantic Elswick Works, William Smith launched the Blenheim from his shipyard on the Tyne, Robert Stephenson was appointed as chief engineer of the new Newcastle and Berwick railway line, and the new High Level Bridge across the Tyne opened.

The beautiful Catholic cathedral had been completed by Pugin the year before, and the grand Central Station would be opened by Queen Victoria two years later. The Newcastle School of Medicine and Surgery had been founded 15 years earlier and already had grand buildings in the centre of the city and a great pride in the expertise it was bringing to the region.

There was a huge and constant demand for skilled workers and the industrialists, scientists and landowners of the North East knew that they had to fuel this growth and prosperity – not only by drawing in experienced people from far afield, but by providing training and opportunities for the people in the poor slums of the cities and the isolated villages of the rural communities.

Within this cauldron of change, people came together to found the Northern Union of Mechanics' Institutes (what is now known as NCFE) to "become a centre from whence the elements of knowledge and civilisation shall go on with an unceasing progress, conferring intellectual, scientific and moral blessings throughout the length and breadth of the Northern Counties."



**There is once again the spirit of social unrest in the air."**

175 years later, in 2023, we are once again in a time of change and turbulence. Advances in technology and industry are quite literally unbelievable to some older generations. They also have unknown consequences for the young who are growing up in a world which may not provide them with the opportunities for work which were assumed by previous generations.

There is once again the spirit of social unrest in the air. Dissatisfaction with inequalities, rejection of old norms and aspirations by many, and an overwhelming sense for some that existing structures and systems are not keeping pace with the speed of change create a sense of anxiety which often outweighs the exhilaration of the new.



**...shaping learning for the society of today so that it is fit for the society of tomorrow."**

Our charitable mission at NCFE has not fundamentally changed all that much since that of our founders in 1848. We continue to devote our resources to shaping learning for the society of today so that it is fit for the society of tomorrow. We want people of all ages and stages of life to find learning that helps them to enter and navigate an increasingly volatile and challenging labour market.

Increasingly, we are looking for ways to strengthen cross-cutting and underpinning human skills which will build resilience, agility, creativity and adaptability, as well as technical and vocational skills aiming at particular sectors.

**Like our founders, we believe in the great power of learning to transform lives and unlock unexpected futures – and as the guardians entrusted with NCFE's future, we will continue to do our best to "go on with unceasing progress".**

# Introduction

By Philip Le Feuvre,  
Chief Operating Officer at NCFE

**To mark NCFE's 175th anniversary, we have invited collaborators from across the sector to develop a series of spotlight reports focused on four key sectors that are essential to the future of the UK's prosperity and productivity; education and early years, social care, digital, and the Further Education (FE) sector itself.**

By analysing workforce data and bringing together leading voices from across these sectors, as well as hearing from those working on the frontline of their respective fields, we can begin to identify current and upcoming challenges, as well as potential opportunities to address the skills gaps that have emerged.

What's clear from the insights in these reports is that sector skills gaps will continue or worsen if bold and transformative action is not taken.

We are simultaneously releasing a paper on transforming the skills landscape, drawing in data and deep insight from employers and further sector experts to create an exciting but practical vision for post-16 education.

NCFE was born at the time of the first industrial revolution, with a vision to help people adapt to a rapidly changing world – and that's exactly what's needed now if we are to ensure both the survival and long-term success of these critical sectors.



# Executive summary

As an educational charity and leader in vocational and technical learning, NCFE's core purpose is to promote and advance learning. This means helping more individuals to realise their true potential – in turn, establishing more sustainable communities.

NCFE's series of sector-based reports – of which this FE Sector paper is the first – provides an opportunity to use data and insight to reflect on some of the biggest skills challenges the UK is currently facing, as well as look ahead to what could happen if the changes required aren't implemented.

With almost two centuries of experience to draw upon, this is an opportunity to learn from the past and forge a path forward in some of the UK's most important sectors, starting with FE.

Movements need collaborators, so by combining NCFE's deep knowledge with external experts and first-hand experiences, we get a more rounded picture of the unique challenges, but also opportunities, within this sector including:

- recruitment and retention
- career progression and professional development
- awareness and recognition
- employer and industry engagement
- pay gaps and funding.

The analysis presented in this report has incredible potential to sustain, revitalise and even transform the sector. Data from the last five years show the skills gap in education to be growing and yet demand for some roles only increasing.

Now is the time for education, industry and policymakers to use insight like this to create a brighter tomorrow for FE, its current and future workforce, the people that rely on it, and the learners that aspire to be part of what's to come.

# Setting the scene

The FE sector focuses on enhancing employability and preparing individuals for the workforce, catering to a wide spectrum of learners with different abilities and aspirations. It plays a vital role in shaping a skilled and adaptable workforce to support economic growth and societal development.

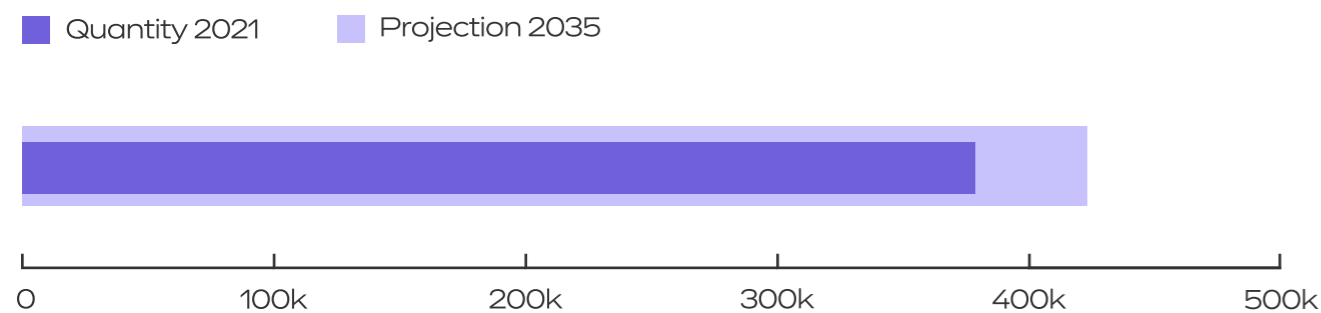
**Table A:** [ONS Labour demand volumes by profession and local authority, UK](#)

Number of job postings (2022)	1,234,990
Job postings 5-year change (2017-2022)	+175,765
Job postings 5-year % change (2017-2022)	+16.59%

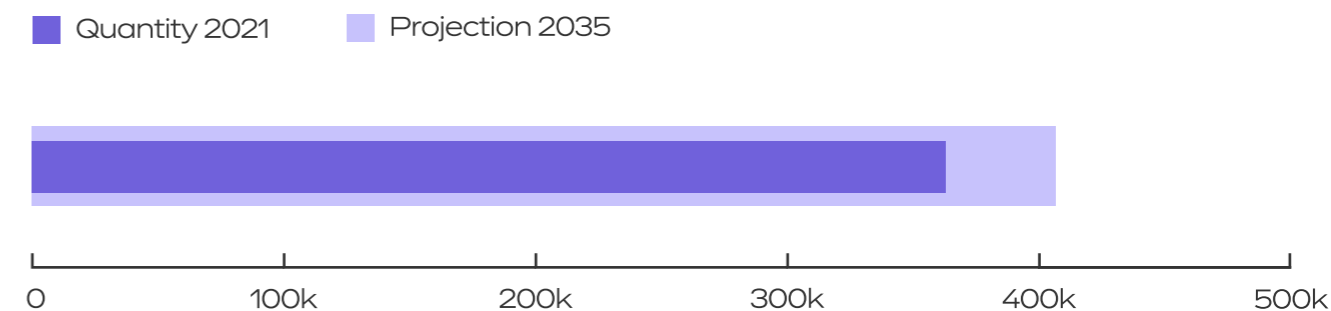
In 2022, there were over 175,000 more job postings within the education sector as a whole compared with 2017. This growth includes brand-new jobs, known as emerging skills, as well as vacancies created by people leaving roles. Both result in a skills gap which, within the education sector, has increased by more than 16% since 2017 - a concerning gap that is believed to be even greater within further education.

**Table B:** [NFER The Skills Imperative 2035: Occupational Outlook – Longrun employment prospects for the UK, Baseline Projections](#)

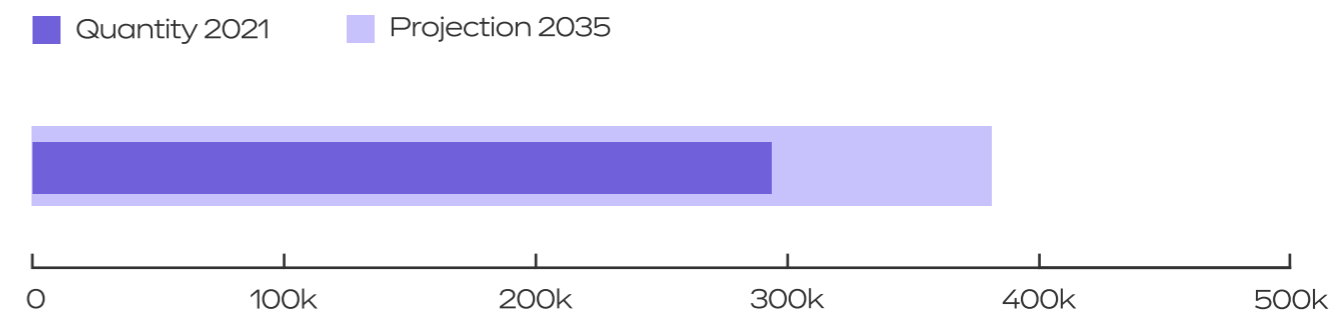
## Secondary education teaching professionals



## Primary education teaching professionals



## Higher level teaching assistants



Projections for skills demand have been researched by the Nuffield Foundation and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in the October 2022 paper, *The Skills Imperative 2035: Occupational Outlook – Long-run employment prospects for the UK, Baseline Projections*.

The paper acknowledges that it cannot foresee the future, but its predictions present a likely scenario of what will happen in the labour market in the coming years. Although we are unable to focus specifically on occupations within FE, the three professions highlighted show that a significant increase in numbers is required to counter rising demand.

If we consider a [2022 survey by the Association of Colleges](#) - of the 48% of colleges that responded, the average number of vacancies per college was 30, including both teaching and support roles, with a maximum of 162 for one college. 1,404 vacancies were reported in curriculum areas, with "high levels of persistent vacancies in construction, engineering, health and social care and science and maths."

1,853 vacancies were in support areas, with "high levels of persistent vacancies in learning support roles, student services and facilities and estates roles." Almost all (96%) of respondents reported that the current level of vacancies is creating increased pressure on existing staff.

## From the sector: David Hughes CBE Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges (AoC)

David Hughes is Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges, representing and supporting further education colleges to fulfil their role as anchor institutions, supporting over 2 million students each year. He was awarded a CBE for services to FE, particularly during the Covid-19 response. David has worked in post-16 education for over 25 years, including a decade as a senior civil servant. Before that he worked in Australia and the UK in community development, regeneration, welfare, employment and social housing. David holds several Board positions including with the World Federation of Colleges and Polytechnics and the Bell Foundation.



# Looking for long-term solutions to solve the skills crisis in FE colleges

The headline increase over the last five years in education job postings is no surprise, with colleges facing increasing challenges in retaining their staff as well as in recruiting.

It would be easy to explain this challenge by focusing simply on the pay gap that has emerged in the last decade between college lecturer pay and school teacher pay, because we have evidence to show that this gap is now around £8,000 per annum on average. But that would be a mistake, because the true picture is much more complex than that – profile, training and diversity issues also have a big impact.



**Many lecturers in construction, digital, engineering and other disciplines can find more lucrative and attractive jobs back in their industry..."**

Pay, though, is a central driver in understanding the challenge. The pay gap with school teachers is a useful and symbolic benchmark, but for many lecturers in colleges the real gap is with the industry for which they are teaching.

Many lecturers in construction, digital, engineering and other disciplines can find more lucrative and attractive jobs back in their industry, not least because of the skills shortages the labour market is experiencing. It's an ironic and vicious cycle, with industry crying out for skilled people but colleges struggling to recruit and retain lecturers to educate and train more potential new recruits.

The announcement in July 2023 of additional funding for colleges to support a better pay award will help, but only a little. At best it will mean that the pay gap with schools will not widen much further. The often-bigger pay gap to industry will not be closed very much at all, with private sector pay surging ahead of the public sector.

What's needed is a commitment from all political parties to close the gap with

schools as soon as possible and to address key sector skills shortages with additional funding.

Decisions on where to work and which job to go for rarely only rest with pay, so we need to think beyond just this when trying to address the staffing crisis for colleges. I'd point to three key areas where colleges are working hard to be creative and are looking for longer-term solutions.



**We need to do more to open them up, raise their profile and show people why and how they are such great places to work."**

The first is about the profile of colleges, and perhaps about their reputations. We've been working hard nationally as a sector, as well as locally, to raise the profile of colleges as key anchor institutions with a wide-ranging impact across society, the economy and in every community.

Every person I've spoken to who has visited a college for the first time as an adult walks away in awe of what they have seen and the students and staff they have met. That's great, but this remains a problem for the college sector because too many adults, particularly those in positions of power, have no direct experience themselves of what goes on inside colleges – they really are one of the best kept secrets of every community.

We need to do more to open them up, raise their profile and show people why and how they are such great places to work.

The second area is teacher training and professional development. Whilst most undergraduates know about teaching in schools as a career, very few will ever consider college lecturing as a profession.

The reasons for this are longstanding and deep, but we need to try to change things.

More collective action to market colleges at graduate fairs, provide greater clarity on the roles and training routes available, and more investment in professional development will help. We established the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) to be our sector leader in workforce development, and yet, we have not grasped its full potential. We need to do better, using ETF and lots of great work in individual colleges to showcase the training and professional development our sector can offer.

Thirdly, we need to embrace diversity and inclusion as a strength of our sector. Every year the Centre for Diversity recognises the brilliant work going on in so many colleges on diversity and inclusion, and AoC's own training for new leaders is supporting talented people from diverse backgrounds to become the leaders of the future.

Yet, all of this masks a decade of under-investment whereby there was far too little support for emerging leaders, resulting in our current leadership cadre which is simply not diverse enough and does not fully reflect the students that colleges support. A bigger push on diversity, at every level, could open up new groups of people to come into and excel in our colleges.

Pay, profile, training and diversity all need addressing if we are to see colleges flourish in a complex world in which they are arguably more important as anchor institutions than ever before. The advances in technology alone will require people of all ages to train and re-train throughout their lives, and with an ageing population we need lifelong learning, anchored in every college, to become the norm.

That's an exciting prospect – one that we need to market better to attract the staff colleges need to deliver.

### From NCFE: Michael Lemin Head of Policy at NCFE

Michael has spent his career in education, local government, and international development. He is an expert in vocational and technical education policy, working to support the development of a system that is fit for all.



## Funding of the FE workforce is not a cost but a necessary investment

For all of the work that we do, the quality of teaching is the single most important aspect of the learning experience. Yet, as it stands, there is a serious threat to the ongoing viability of the FE teaching workforce which could impact on the experiences of learners for years to come.

The current recruitment and retention crisis within teaching as a whole has, rightly so, received much media coverage – particularly in terms of schools. Yet, this crisis is even more stark in FE and is exacerbated by the difference in funding between schools and colleges. According to the [AoC College Workforce Survey](#), 96% of colleges stated they were having difficulty filling posts in 2020/21.

A report published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in March 2023 – '[What has happened to college teacher pay in England?](#)' – outlined that while the median pay for a school teacher is currently around £41,500, the equivalent salary remains just £34,500 for their counterpart in a college. One can see why FE colleges struggle to recruit, particularly if they are competing with schools for the same talent.

The report also outlines how 15% of school teachers leave the profession after one year – a worrying statistic for sure – but it

is even worse in colleges, with around 25% of colleges teachers leaving after a year. Clearly, retention is also a major issue.

The challenge is even more distinct in subjects such as digital, as it can be difficult to find qualified, skilled staff willing to work in a college when they can earn far more working in industry. These patterns are also further pronounced in rural and more deprived urban areas, where the need is often greatest.



**We need to attract, develop and retain great teachers if we are ever to ensure that we're supplying the skills needed to boost UK productivity..."**

The technical subjects that colleges tend to specialise in – including digital, social care and the early years – are areas of the workforce in great need, not just now, but in the future. We need to attract, develop and retain great teachers if we are ever to ensure that we're supplying the skills needed to boost UK productivity – but this

cannot, and will not, happen if pathways into these sectors become more restricted due to lack of people to teach them.

FE workforce challenges apply not only to teachers but to teaching assistants (TAs) as well.

Our [recent report into the experiences of teaching assistants](#) found that almost three quarters (73%) of TAs indicated that they'd thought about, or were actively looking to move careers, in the last 12 months. This is another impact that will be felt in particular by disadvantaged learners, at a time where we urgently need to close the disadvantage gap that widened during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Make no mistake, this issue is complex, and we must view it in the economic context of our time. We are in the midst of high inflation and a cost-of-living crisis. Teaching is not the only industry fighting for better pay – over the past year, we have seen nurses, junior doctors, ambulance staff, rail workers, airport workers and civil servants take industrial action.

The Government has now agreed to a pay rise for many of these groups, with teacher pay set to rise by 6.5% – but there are no plans to narrow the pay gap between teachers in schools and those in FE. The stark retention and recruitment data we're seeing demonstrates that the issues are particularly prominent in FE and will remain so if investment in the sector continues to lag behind schools.

We understand the value of educators and it's why, in 2020, we joined forces with WorldSkills UK to launch the Centre of Excellence – a pioneering project that's transforming the quality of technical and vocational training in Further Education Colleges by transferring world-class expertise and knowledge to help develop educators and learners. To date, over 40,000 young people and 2,000 educators have benefitted from it.



**...properly funding the future of the FE workforce is not a cost, but an investment..."**

The point remains clear, particularly to those of us working within education, that properly funding the future of the FE workforce is not a cost, but an investment critical to the UK's productivity and prosperity.

The real question should be, can we afford not to do it?



# From the frontline: Dr Sam Parrett CBE

Group Principal and CEO of London South East Colleges



**"There has never been a more important time to invest in and support FE"**



Having spent almost 30 years working in further education, I know what an amazing sector it is – giving people from all backgrounds and of all abilities the opportunity to achieve their career ambitions and be successful.

Colleges provide so much more than education. We are anchor institutions within communities and play an important role throughout the country. I have been working in the sector for almost 30 years and, during this time, have seen the positive impact that it has on people's lives – regardless of their background or previous education.

We have seen the gap between pay in FE and schools widening. There has also been a much greater focus on the recruitment and retention challenges in schools than in FE.

Recruitment and retention is indeed a major issue, putting many in the sector in an unsustainable position. We know this is predominantly the result of pay and workload issues, which are more favourable



**Employers will also struggle if they don't have access to candidates with the right skills to join and develop in their workforces."**

in other industries and elsewhere in the education sector.

This is particularly the case for skills shortage areas and new or emerging subjects, where we are seeing a lot of change – such as green and digital.

Staff shortages have far-reaching consequences. People affected include other college staff who may need to provide teaching cover, as well as learners who are at risk of not benefiting from the most up-to-

date teaching and knowledge. Employers will also struggle if they don't have access to candidates with the right skills to join and develop in their workforces.

Costs for supply teachers are also high, and there are other time and opportunity costs associated with using agency teachers due to the need to provide extra induction and other training.

FE relies on the expertise and knowledge of skilled tradespeople and industry experts. Yet these professionals are in demand and deciding to move within their industries for increased pay, rather than going into teaching.

Industry-relevant knowledge and skills are important to all stakeholder groups; employers want learners with the right skills; learners need courses to provide them with up-to-date knowledge and skills to secure good employment and progress. Having enough staff with the right skills and experience to deliver high quality teaching and learning is critical to being able to do this.

This is all set in a changing context as we experience the development and delivery of new qualifications as part of qualification reforms. There are also concerns about the starting points of those studying in FE, who have been particularly impacted by the pandemic.

We need to provide high quality learning, in circumstances of real terms cuts in funding and workforce shortages, while responding to the impacts of the pandemic on staff and student wellbeing. Add in the delivery of new and changing qualifications, and it's clear that we are working within a tough context.

Collaborative approaches with employers are needed to help support the education sector to address teacher supply. Industry partnerships will also help address challenges, such as up to date equipment and work placement provision.

In return, such collaboration provides tangible benefits to businesses in both the short and long term, via the supply of skills. This approach is based on shared solutions to shared problems – and harnessing these through shared social action agendas might be one option.

The Department for Education's Strategic Development Fund and the Local London Green and Digital Mayoral Academy are good examples of effective partnerships – with colleges, employers and local authorities coming together to develop green skills hubs and facilitate high quality training.



**...we need more recognition and funding to ensure that our workforce is valued and treated fairly in comparison with the rest of the education sector."**

Further education is an incredibly rewarding and important sector. With the Government deeming colleges as the silver bullet to solving the country's skills shortages, there has never been a more important time to invest in and support FE.

Everyone working in the sector knows how rewarding it is, but we need more recognition and funding to ensure that our workforce is valued and treated fairly in comparison with the rest of the education sector.

I will continue advocating for this and doing everything I can to achieve parity of esteem for our outstanding practitioners. This is the only way we will be able to continue offering the opportunities we do for people to progress, upskill, reskill and achieve their ambitions – all of which are essential for communities and economies to thrive.

# Conclusions

As a sector which enhances employability and prepares individuals for the workforce, tackling the increasing skills gap within further education is key to the UK's productivity in the future. We must act to rectify FE's recruitment and retention challenges to benefit all learners who choose this pathway. We've identified three areas of focus drawn from the data and expert views in this report:

## 1

### Close pay gaps

- Whilst additional funding for colleges to support better pay was announced in July 2023, there still needs to be a commitment to closing the gap with school teachers' pay to incentivise skilled educators.
- There must also be targeted funding to close FE teacher shortages in key sectors to ensure pay gaps with industry aren't a barrier to attracting skilled professionals into FE. Only then can we ensure learners receive high quality, up-to-date teaching.

## 2

### Raise the profile of colleges

Colleges are key anchor institutions which sit at the heart of their communities. The 227 colleges across England continue to have a wide-ranging impact across local (and national) society and the economy – yet they are often overlooked.

- It would be fantastic to see more being done to enhance the profile of further education and recruit people into the sector – particularly highlighting the diverse opportunities within it and the vital role it plays.
- We must continue the great work that the Association of Colleges (AoC) has started, to open up colleges, raise their profiles and demonstrate why they are such great places to work. There should be a more concerted effort by the FE sector to promote itself with a focus on the impact it has for learners.

## 3

### Build industry partnerships

Movements need collaborators and, as such, the development of partnerships between colleges, employers and industry will serve to greatly benefit all sides. Through localised, collaborative approaches we can start to address teacher supply, offer suitable work placement provision, and supply a skilled pipeline of talent into the workforce.