



Department  
for Education

# **Annual report of the Further Education Commissioner**

**1 August 2023 to 31 July 2024**

**January 2025**

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## Introduction



Colleges continue to be the bedrock of their local communities. This has been particularly important as riots, following the terrible stabbings in Southport, took hold in parts of the country. The response from the further education sector was immediate and focused on demonstrating colleges as a safe space as well as communicating clear standards and expectations for belonging and inclusion, with zero tolerance for harassment, hate, racism, and discrimination.

We have continued to focus on support for all colleges and completed 178 Active Support visits in the 2023/24 academic year. We have been gathering impact analysis to ensure that the support is worthwhile. At the Department for Education's (DfE) termly survey in July this year, 167 colleges kindly responded to questions relating to FE Commissioner (FEC) work. The response showed that 99% of colleges were aware of the Active Support offered by the FEC. Of these, 76% had interacted with the team and a further 23% were aware of the support but had not yet sought it.

One of our Key Performance Indicators (KPI) is on the effectiveness of Active Support with a success measure of 75% or more reporting this to have made a positive impact. It was therefore really welcoming to hear that 92% of those accessing this support believed that it had made a positive impact. For further details about college and local authority feedback through this survey please see page 16.

Another KPI for my team is to reduce the number of colleges in intervention and use post intervention monitoring and support (PIMS) to assist those ready to exit this category. In this last year, through targeted support delivered by my team working with DfE, 7 colleges have exited intervention and moved into PIMS.

Our Active Support programmes such as Just One Thing (JoT) and Just One More Thing (JoMT) continue to be well received by the further education sector. The aim of these is to focus on effective collaborative working of the chair, governance professionals and principal, as the evidence is clear that the best colleges have very effective working between these three roles. This year, we brought together new-to-post individuals in these roles from the 2022/23 and 2023/24 academic years to address some of the issues being faced by college leaders, as well as discussing solutions and sharing best practice. One of our National Leaders of Further Education (NLFE), Gill Worgan, has also continued to deliver a series of JoMT sessions focusing on special education needs and disabilities (SEND). We have used other NLFEs to run sessions on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), culture, and student behaviour. More details can be found on pages 9 and 10.

One of the key aspects of my role is to provide practitioner insight into government by working closely with ministers and teams across the DfE and the Education and Skills

Funding Agency (ESFA). It has been an interesting end to the year with a change of government. One of the important focuses has been to support the DfE team reviewing qualifications. Nigel Duncan, one of our Deputy FE Commissioners, has led our support for this which has continued into the new year with the short review of qualification reform. We have also worked with ESFA colleagues on issues around managing public money. Becky Edwards, also a Deputy FE Commissioner, and FE advisers with an accountancy background have created an effective benchmarking tool which can be accessed via View Your Education Data (YVED).

An area which we considered following feedback from chairs is the lack of consistent practice around senior post holder and chair reviews. As a result of this, Sandra Prail, one of our National Leaders of Governance, led a group drawing up an effective practice guide. The guide will be available on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) in the next few weeks.

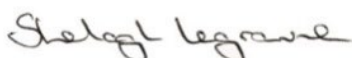
There remains a number of challenges for the FE sector. The first is attracting and retaining teaching staff in a very tight labour market and where pay differentials can be significant between different educational institutions. Some welcome announcements were made in the Autumn Budget of 2024, I know the detailed funding implications are due to be confirmed soon. Meanwhile DfE have provided some very helpful retention payments for teaching hard-to-recruit to subjects and also some generous incentives for those new to teaching in FE.

Colleges continue to face significant challenges around estates and capacity, particularly those seeing substantial growth in student numbers due to a demographic bulge. The Department has funded very welcome capital projects through, the Further Education Capital Transformation Fund, the Local Skills Improvement Fund and T Level funding – however I know that lack of access to commercial borrowing following reclassification continues to be a real challenge in responding rapidly to significant new demands.

A further challenge is the reduction in the number of colleges achieving good or outstanding from Ofsted. Whilst the percentage, around 86%, is well above the levels achieved in 2017, there are clearly challenges, in part arising from the effects of Covid and also a shortage of teachers.

I know leadership in this sector is tough for principals, senior teams, chairs, and governance professionals. I want to thank you and your staff for your courage and tenacity in delivering an outstanding student experience in your colleges. It is worth it for current and future generations and to build the skills we need for the UK economy.

I hope you all had a relaxing festive break and are feeling refreshed and ready for the new term.



**Shelagh Legrave, CBE**  
**FE Commissioner**

# Active Support

## Working with local authorities

The FE Commissioner's (FEC) team fulfilled its commitment to extend the Active Support offer to local authority further education providers. The types of support offered included preparing for an Ofsted inspection, strategic planning for leadership and governance with the support of the national leaders of governance (NLGs), as well as health checks and curriculum efficiency and financial sustainability support (CEFSS). Alongside this direct support, the FEC team have also run informative webinars including a focus on 'putting the SAR and QUIP at the heart of a rich and live quality framework' and 'research feedback on AEB effective practice' which have been well attended by the sector. Positive feedback on engaging with Active Support from those local authority providers who have directly benefitted, has also been cascaded via a webinar and at the HOLEX conferences. Feedback indicates that those who engaged with the FEC team were better able and more confident in reviewing quality processes, had increased confidence in implementing new teaching and learning policies and that the support had significantly raised the quality of education, leadership and governance as well as improving or helping to maintain positive Ofsted gradings. A webpage is available [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) and lists the help and support available to local authority FE providers.

The FEC team is currently working on what works well in teaching and learning/pedagogy, and voices from the sector in their own words, which will include input from local authority providers.

## Health checks

Health checks are flexible in their approach and are intended to provide a free review of a college's operations with the ability to focus on parts of a college's plan as appropriate. Available to any college, they consist of a 2-day visit to the provider by the FEC team. They look at and feedback on their current financial and curriculum plans. They also look at a range of statistical information both held by DfE and supplied by the provider. These are of particular help to new or recently appointed senior leaders, although they are helpful at any stage for any organisation.

The FEC team has carried out 6 health checks in FE colleges and a further 2 in local authority FE providers in the period between August 2023 and July 2024. Once a health check is completed, a college can then decide what further action is needed, and whether to request further help and support from the FEC team.

## Structural reviews

Structural reviews are undertaken when a change to the structure of a college or provision may be needed to maintain financial sustainability and high-quality opportunities for learners. Structural reviews are generally conducted as structure and

prospects appraisals (SPAs), looking at a single institution. There are also local provision reviews, which can include more than one institution and assess provision across a defined area.

During the 2023/24 academic year, 2 new FE Commissioner-led SPAs were started, of which 1 was completed. In addition, another SPA started in the previous reporting year was completed.

The recommendations from completed structural reviews may be subject to negotiations between DfE and the colleges, which also undertake their own due diligence process. This will determine the exact form in which the recommended solution may be implemented and the associated timescale.

## **National leaders of further education and national leaders of governance**

National leaders of further education (NLFEs) are serving college leaders and finance directors who have a strong track record of delivering improvement – both at their own colleges and in working with others.

National leaders of governance (NLGs) are experienced college governors and governance professionals/clerks with a strong record of supporting college improvement.

Both NLFEs and NLGs provide mentoring and peer to peer support to other colleges on a range of issues, including curriculum, finance, and governance. They also help to share best practice and lead the ‘Just One Thing’ and ‘Just One More Thing’ strands of Active Support (see page 9).

During the academic year 2023/24, NLFEs and NLGs were supporting 59 principals, CEOs, and governing bodies. In total, NLFEs and NLGs have worked with over 300 principals, CEOs and governing bodies since this initiative was introduced in 2018.

There are currently 7 NLFEs, 1 NLFE finance specialist and 11 NLGs. More information, and details of current [NLFEs](#) and [NLGs](#), is available on GOV.UK.

## **Further education leadership mentoring programme**

The further education leadership mentoring programme was launched in May 2023. It supports existing and aspiring college leaders with high potential to develop and progress in their careers, as well as assisting them in their current role.

It also aims to create a stronger and more diverse pipeline to the most senior roles in the further education sector.

The programme has 24 mentors who are highly skilled previous chief executives, principals and finance directors at FE colleges and therefore have extensive experience of the FE sector.

During the second round of the mentoring programme in the 2023/24 academic year, 64 mentees were matched with a mentor. The programme encourages applications from staff with protected characteristics who are underrepresented in college leadership positions. 15 per cent of places on the programme are prioritised for applicants who have a disability or come from black and ethnic minority communities. The third round of the programme was launched in September 2024. More information is available on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

## Curriculum efficiency and financial sustainability support

Curriculum efficiency and financial sustainability support (CEFSS) aims to help FE colleges with costed curriculum and financial planning. Demand for CEFSS remained high with 54 FE colleges participating between August 2023 and July 2024. Alongside the CEFSS offer, a guide to effective practice in curriculum planning was published on GOV.UK – it is an exploration of the principal stages involved in effective curriculum planning and can be found on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

### Case Study: Halesowen College

The FEC team has been pleased to support Halesowen College through a CEFSS (Curriculum Efficiency and Financial Sustainability Support) across the past year.

We returned recently to consider the impact the support has had and gain feedback. The CEO and Principal, Jacquie Carman, in her summary presentation of impact noted that CEFSS has:

- enabled a more efficient and effective approach
- impacted bottom line
- allowed for recalibration of course hours
- been a driver for cultural change

Jacquie's recent report to the board outlines further that:

*"In terms of the CEFSS project we estimate that we have generated approximately £500k of savings due to:*

- *reduced attrition*
- *resolution of issues with high needs funding*
- *recalibration of course hours*
- *renegotiation of the teaching staff contract*

*These savings will be further crystalised once the lagged funding has "caught up". The actual savings will be reported through to the Finance and Resources committee in the summer term once 2025/26 budgets are known. This meeting was exceptionally positive for the College and provides encouragement for the whole team".*

The FE Commissioner team first supported the college board in 2023 in the appointment of their Principal and CEO. The enthusiastic new CEO/Principal then invited the FE Commissioner team to undertake a CEFSS, which began, shortly after her appointment, in May 2023.

The initial data sharing and discussion that arose was powerful. The college eagerly addressed suggested areas for development and took up offers of aligned FEC active support. This included NLFE support for the CEO and Principal, mentoring for the newly appointed CFO, NLG support for the Chair, support for the development of the Curriculum Strategy and engagement in leadership development through the 'Just One Thing' support for new CEOs. It has been good to see such good use made of the active support available.

We returned to Halesowen College in November 2024 for a final update on the impact that CEFSS and active support has had on Halesowen College. This considered the various recommendations that CEFSS had suggested. Much positive work had taken place on developing the curriculum strategy and an aligned curriculum planning process, with closer understanding of, and attention to, contribution analysis. The CEO and Principal, Jacquie Carman, led and launched this revised process in person, with governor engagement and with management development underpinning the work with teams. The curriculum strategy aligned with revised finance, estates and people strategies- and with a refresh of staff contracts, case loading for assessors and remission practices. The college brought all plans into one unified plan, referred to as the 'One Direction Plan' which was widely shared and understood across college. This was all within an envelope of clear and open communication from the CEO and Principal and her team- and developing a positive cultural change with students and staff at its core.

In our recent visit to assess the impact of CEFSS, Jacquie summed up as follows:

*"Thank you to CEFSS for:*

- *positive challenge*
- *being a catalyst for refreshed curriculum planning*
- *raised awareness*
- *furling ambition*
- *contributing to our agenda for positive change*

*The next steps on our journey are clear".*

## **Annual strategic conversations**

The FEC team attended around 200 annual strategic conversations (ASCs) held between colleges and the Department for Education in the 2023/24 academic year<sup>1</sup>. ASCs give

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the general election held in July 2024, some ASCs were deferred and held at the beginning of the 2024 to 2025 academic year.



colleges the opportunity to showcase their achievements, strengths and good practice and share their vision and long-term strategies. They are a platform for colleges to raise any issues or challenges that they are facing. The FEC team have also been able to discuss the range of active support available to colleges.

## Just One Thing and Just One More Thing

Just One Thing (JoT) is an NLFE and NLG led strand of Active Support for the sector that was developed to support newly appointed Chairs, CEOs, and governance professionals.

It aims to share and enhance the sector's effective practice and complement, not duplicate, existing leadership support. It provides a vehicle for those new in post to gain bite size support and advice and, recognising the wealth of experience across the NLFE and NLG team, utilise the expertise of NLFE and NLGs to lead, sharing the 'just one thing' reflections established leaders wished they had known when first in post.

JoT conferences are held at City Lit and learning was also captured via [videoed interviews with NLGs and NLFES, sharing their reflections and learning](#). The focus was on early, bite-size support and in particular reinforcing the importance of the 'triumvirate', the close working of the three key roles in the leadership of colleges, the Chair, CEO and governance professional. We have had some excellent speakers at the events, including the Permanent Secretary, Susan Acland- Hood, Mark Malcomson and Shelagh Legrave, Sir Vince Cable, Dame Moira Gibb DBE, Former CEO of Camden Council, governance expert Randall Peterson, Professor of Organisational Behaviour, London Business School and many more, sharing their leadership learning. Some of the feedback comments are captured below.

### Verbal feedback from participants at Just One Thing events

"I think it was useful to help sort of sense check our approach and things we'd been doing."

"Hearing from Chairs and Governance Professionals and being able to put that into context for me in my role was very important."

"...So, I think we've done some fundamental changes since the event."

"It felt like a safe space for people, and an opportunity where people could be quite honest about their own experiences and talk quite openly about the challenges that they had faced."

"Useful to hear other people's points of view and their bit of journey in terms of their relationship between the Chair or Governance Professional and how does all of that fit together."

"I've been able to use my network from the event to be able to help and support my new Chair with his network moving forward."

"Meeting in person helps strengthen relationships and expands opportunities for collaboration."

Feedback from delegates and further reflection with the NLFE and NLG team gave rise to another 'spin off' pilot: Just One *More* Thing (JoMT).

It was felt that the JoT style of delivery could be adapted to cover themes of current importance to the sector and that this should be open to all CEOs, Chairs and governance professionals, not just those new in post. In addition, lead senior managers or governors for the topics covered would also be welcomed. Themes would be determined by sector need and events would be located in different colleges and regions, hosted by the lead NLFE in their own colleges. JoMT was piloted with Gill Worgan CEO of West Herts (an NLFE), who led the way with an event focussed on SEND at her college, West Herts College. The response was very positive so this style of support was expanded to plan four further JoMT events.

The events for 23/24 were deliberately spread across England at NLFES own colleges. Whilst this meant some travel challenges for those attending, it led to a richer appreciation of context and regional opportunities, differences, and challenges. It has been incredible to see and hear of such great leadership and effective practice across the sector and with such willingness to showcase and share.



Some of the feedback comments from JoMT events are captured below.

### **Verbal feedback from participants at Just One More Thing events**

"Thank you! Fabulous day—well organised with a super welcome from all staff."

"Very well organised, great opportunity to share experience and problems."

"Powerful authentic speakers!"

"I really hope the Just One More Thing events continue. I find them hugely useful and inspiring in terms of what I can then take back to my own college for continuous improvement."

"I would like to thank the speakers and organisers for the work that they put in. Although I don't fit any of the main categories of attendees, I felt included."

"It was a very enjoyable day, and it was nice to bring together members of the triumvirate."

"Excellent conference with great venue and hospitality. As ever, fantastically curated and designed."

"Excellent organisation and content."

The proposal is to run four further JoMT events in the 2024/25 academic year. You can find more information on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

## **FE leaders wellbeing – professional supervision service**

FE leaders' wellbeing and mental health is of paramount importance and, following the success of the pilot, we have been able to continue to provide the [FE leaders professional supervision service](#) for this year.

The service provides FE leaders with fully funded access to a programme of individual professional supervision comprising six remotely delivered sessions. This gives FE leaders a safe and confidential space to talk with a qualified supervisor about what is going on for them at work, support them in processing this and develop new coping strategies to feel more fulfilled and in control.

*"I am a very positive person anyway, but my job has been so stressful over the last few years that I was considering leaving. Supervision has helped me (among other things) to address some of those stressors and deal with them"* FE Leader.

The FE leaders professional supervision service is delivered by [Education Support](#), the only charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of all education staff, and delivers the service for both FE and schools.

Since first starting in 2023, to date a total of 118 FE leaders have benefited from accessing professional supervision. Their feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with 97% reporting they found professional supervision helpful and that they would recommend the service to a friend or colleague. They have also highlighted the positive benefits for their mental health and wellbeing.

*“My supervisor was supportive, challenging and a real lifeline at times. Thank you for investing in this support”* FE Leader.

Critically, where assessed as needing it the service has been able to offer free counselling, delivered by qualified BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) accredited counsellor.

We encourage you to help make sure everyone is aware of this valuable support and seeks to use it when they need it.

## Intervention Support

The FE Commissioner and her team reviewed the provision and finances of FE colleges, designated institutions and sixth form colleges subject to intervention during the year, in line with the published policy. These reviews help to identify and agree the specific steps a college needs to take to improve.

The FE Commissioner undertook 5 capability and capacity assessments during the 2023 to 2024 reporting period. These assessments followed institutions entering intervention, 2 of which entered intervention because of financial control, one because of financial health and 1 as result of failure to progress issues of concern. One assessment was related to a college entering intervention in the previous reporting year.

As of 31 July 2024, a total of 9 colleges remained subject to intervention.

Neither the FE Commissioner nor DfE want colleges to remain in intervention for longer than is necessary. During the year, 7 colleges have been removed from intervention.

When a college exits intervention, the FE Commissioner and their team work with the DfE Place-Based Team to agree a post-intervention monitoring and support (PIMS) plan. Of the 7 colleges removed from intervention, 5 moved into PIMS. In addition, 1 college moved into PIMS following a merger.

Where we fund local authorities to deliver further education and Ofsted judge that provision to be inadequate, the FE Commissioner can undertake a capability assessment and make recommendation. During the period 1 August 2023 – 31 July 2024, 1 local authority was placed in intervention following an inadequate Ofsted and the FE Commissioner also undertook an assessment.

The summaries of [FE Commissioner intervention reports](#) are published on GOV.UK.

### Case study: Hull College

Hull College had faced over a decade of instability, financial uncertainty and multiple requires improvement Ofsted grades. It had been in intervention since 2016. Financial support from the government was required in 2018 to maintain solvency. Its reputation was damaged, which added to the complexity of trying to deliver a great student experience.

Hull College serves one of the most socially and economically deprived regions of the UK, it is rated as the 4th most deprived local authority. 30% of all students have a learning difficulty or disability, GCSE scores on entry are in the bottom 5% nationally, 70% of all students don't have GCSE English, maths or both when joining the college.

Following several interim principals and a succession of chairs, the Further Education Commissioner (FEC) team provided some stability and support through the appointment of an experienced ex-principal as chair who, in turn, recruited a sector leader who had

taken his previous college to outstanding. This created stability and a platform on which to rebuild and cement the college as an anchor institution in Hull. Ofsted recognised green shoots in its inspection in February 2022 and adults, apprentices and high needs were all judged to be good, but the overall grade remains requires improvement.

By the middle of 2022, the college had attracted a new principal, Debra Gray MBE, whose previous experience had been at the then Ofsted outstanding TEC Partnership. This brought stability to the college, supported by two excellent vice principals who were already in role. The senior team was further strengthened with strong recruitment and a national leader of governance took over as Chair of the Corporation.

This team have worked relentlessly with the staff at Hull College over the last 2.5 years to utterly transform the college and its place in the Humber Region, focusing on 5 key elements:

- student success
- culture
- financial stability
- brand and reputation
- innovation

Their clear aim was to ensure learner success was among the best in the country, that staff enjoyed coming to work, finances were secure, brand and reputation recovered swiftly, and that the college became digitally enabled and award winning.

Success rates are on a 3 year upward trend and are now in the top quartile. The college was reinspected by Ofsted in October 2023 who confirmed the college's first good grade in many years. They also achieved outstanding for adult provision and personal development with strong for meeting skills needs.

The college has reduced a significant operating deficit to a balanced budget in just 2 years and without redundancies. The Adult Skills budget is now being achieved in full.

The college moved out of intervention in February 2024.

The college has won over 18 national and international awards in the last 18 months, including a Beacon Award, A Green Gown, two Learning Technology awards, and College of the Year at the 2024 Educate North Awards.

The turnaround at Hull demonstrates how strong leadership can transform a college, even in one of the most deprived areas of the country. The foundations were set by a very experienced interim principal and chair. The new leadership team has built on this with such impressive results in a very short space of time, creating a strong shared culture, underpinned by 'evolution at pace'.

## Leading and advocating for the sector

### Principal Reference Group

The FE Commissioner and her team reviewed the provision and finances of FE colleges, designated institutions and sixth form colleges subject to intervention during the year, in line with the published policy. These

The [Principals Reference Group](#) (PRG) is currently made up of 8 serving college principals/CEOs. The group supports, challenges, and advises the FE Commissioner in her role of improving performance and spreading best practice in FE colleges. It also contributes to the implementation of policy for colleges in the further education sector.

The PRG met formally 6 times during the 2023 to 2024 reporting period and has discussed a range of topics including funding, workforce, qualification reform and skills bootcamps.



### FE Commissioner roadshows

During the autumn term 2023, we held our roadshow in three cities across the country with a fourth option to attend virtually. Designed to engage senior leaders in the strategic issues of the day, the roadshow presented topical briefings and discussion on subjects such as post-16 qualifications reform, effective practice in managing student behaviour, and approaches to implementing cultural change, together with an update on FEC priorities for the forthcoming 2023/24 academic year.

At the London event, the then secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan, discussed with the further education commissioner her priorities for the post-16 sector and its importance in supporting the achievement of the Government's ambitious targets. Skills priorities were being driven by Sir Michael Barber, and included, T-Levels, higher technical qualifications, lifelong learning entitlement, and skills bootcamps. Of course, apprenticeships were also high on the agenda.

Across the four roadshow events, representatives attended from 81% of the FE sector (94% of GFECs and 27% of SFCs). Feedback from the roadshow events provided extremely useful steers about what was effective and where we can make improvements. Broadly the topics were considered useful, with 80% of delegates satisfied with the headline subjects covered. However, whilst the format was generally received well, delegates would have liked less time being presented to, and more time to discuss the topics and for Q&A sessions with the keynote speakers. Some delegates also suggested

more frequent roadshow events, perhaps twice a year, with fewer topics, giving more time for discussion and networking. Also, a key request – avoid half term!

A post-event survey highlighted the most important themes raised by delegates as (in alphabetical order): alternative academic qualifications, Advanced British Standard, communications between DfE and the sector, employer involvement, funding, financial support, HTQs, an increasing number of L2 learners, pace of implementation, progression routes, reforming occupational standards, Ofsted, continuity between pre and post-16 provision – particularly English and maths, SEND, and T-Levels. Some have perhaps already resolved themselves, but the majority remain high on the agenda for the sector, albeit many are already being confronted by the new secretary of state and her skills minister.

Well over 100 question themes were captured through the post-event survey, which were combined with questions collected during the allied DfE qualification reform workshops being run simultaneously for strategic curriculum leads. A written response to each of the key themes was provided by relevant policy teams after the conclusion of the combined events programme. Feedback relating to qualifications reform was sent to relevant departments to inform future planning.

## **Recent feedback on the FEC team and their work**

The FE Commissioner and her team are keen to continue to receive feedback from the sector on the suitability and impact of the support that they provide, including suggestions for further improvement.

In the DfE's termly survey in July 2024, 167 FE colleges responded to questions relating to FEC work and of those, 76% said they had interacted with the FEC team with another 23% saying they knew about the active support offer, but they had yet to engage with support. 93% of colleges who had interacted with the FEC team described the impact of the support received by the FEC team as having had a 'positive' impact on their college and significantly, many could provide specific examples of how the work of the FEC Team had led to impactful and positive changes within their organisation. Furthermore, 83% of all FE Colleges who responded to the survey, indicated that they are likely to voluntarily request support if they have an issue which falls within the FEC Team's remit.

In the same survey, 55 local authority FE providers responded to the questions about FEC work. Of those that responded, 47% knew about, and have interacted with, the FEC team. A further 33% knew about the FEC offer of support but had not interacted to date. Of those respondents who had received FEC support, 88% were 'positive' about the impact they had made. Feedback included comments about being impressed with the level and quality of support given, and their advice making an impact on learner experience.





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