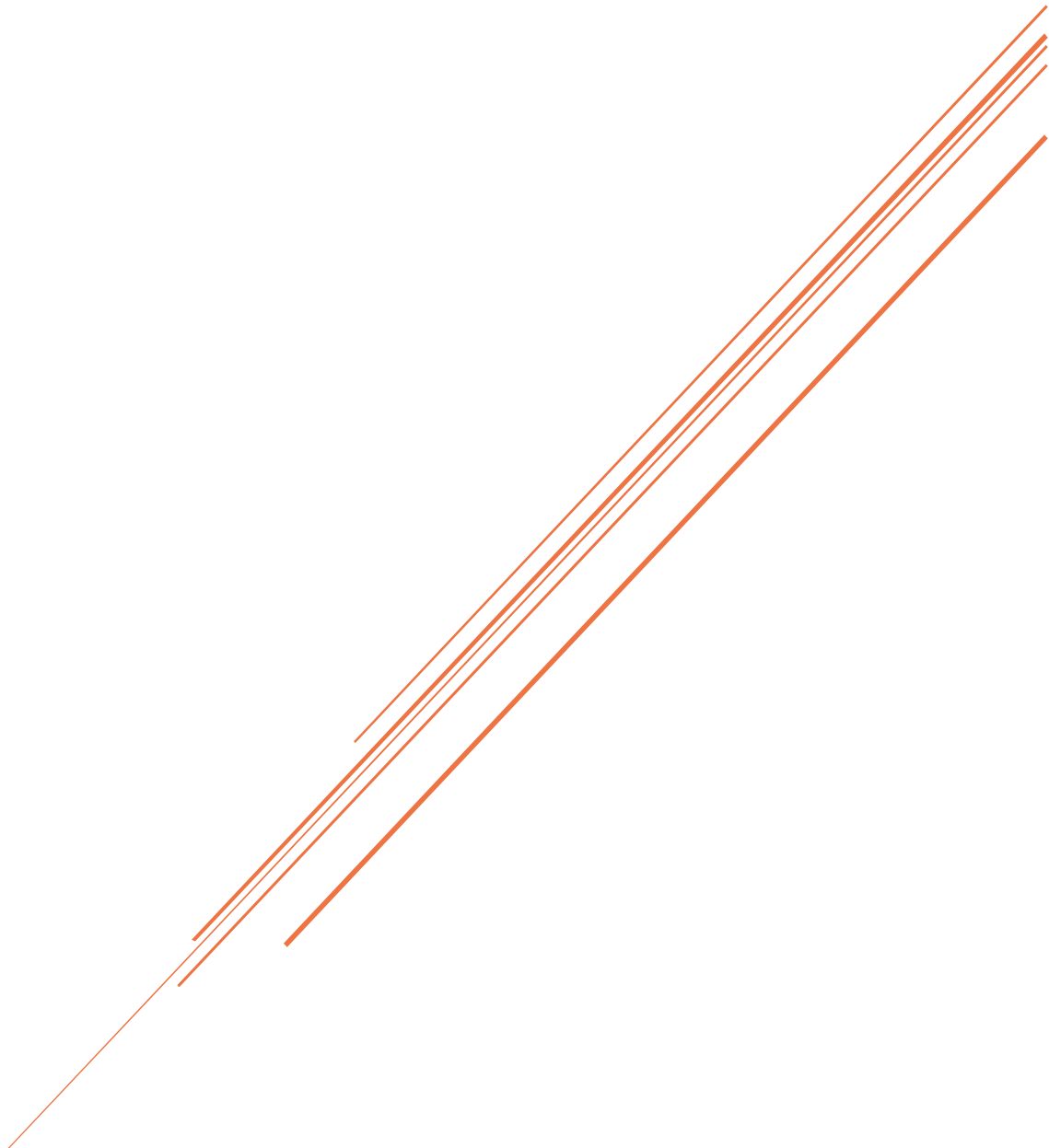


COVID 19: HOW IS THE SECTOR COPING?

Problems, solution, and remaining barriers



**Federation for
Industry Sector
Skills & Standards**



COVID 19: How is the sector coping? Problems, solutions, and remaining barriers

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Contents

COVID 19: How is the sector coping? Problems, solutions, and remaining barriers	1
Introduction	1
Key themes	2
1. Problems	2
1.1. Apprentices have been ‘let go’, made redundant, furloughed or are unable to work	2
1.2. The pipeline is running dry	3
1.3. Finance and funding	4
1.4. Disruption to assessment	4
1.5. Apprentice engagement and well-being	5
1.6. Some apprentices lack tech	6
2. Solutions	6
2.1. Online tools and remote learning	6
2.2. Modifying delivery and assessment	8
2.3. Delaying	8
3. Barriers: What does the sector want from regulators, government and other stakeholders?	9
3.1. Clarity	9
3.2. Parity	10
3.3. Speed	11
3.4. Flexibility	11
3.5. Financial support	12
3.6. Other stakeholders	13

Introduction

This report presents a summary of key themes from the *FISSS - COVID 19 and Apprenticeships; How are you coping?* Survey. The survey was launched on 3 April 2020 and the initial analysis conducted on the 8th April. This report pulls out key themes and illustrative quotes. The report shows that organisations in the sector are adapting quickly often with innovative solutions. However, some barriers remain.

The survey remains open and we welcome further feedback:

<https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/45PT1F/>

Key themes

- Furloughing, redundancy, being 'let go', and the inability to attend the workplace are causing major disruption to delivery, assessment and continuity of programmes.
- The apprenticeship pipeline is running dry. This includes a loss of current and future apprentices from the system.
- The need for finance and funding is a big theme.
- There is major disruption to assessment. Providers are managing but for practical observation this is not always possible.
- Keeping apprentices engaged is difficult. Some providers are increasingly focusing on pastoral care.
- Some apprentices lack hardware, internet access, and the digital skills needed to continue remotely.
- Many providers are using remote tools successfully. This includes virtual learning environments and e-portfolios.
- Delivery and assessment has been modified where possible.
- Some aspects of provision have been delayed until after lock down.
- Providers crave clarity, and use exactly that word.
- Parity with other parts of the education system namely GCSE and A levels is sought.
- Decisions by regulators and government need to be made quickly.
- Providers would like to see flexibility.
- Providers would like financial support.

1. Problems

1.1. Apprentices have been 'let go', made redundant, furloughed or are unable to work

Each brings its own challenge. Training providers note that some apprentices are particularly vulnerable to 'being let go' due to their short tenure (less than two years). Furthermore, finding a replacement role for these apprentices is difficult in the current climate. After losing their job or moving to a new role, some of these apprentices are lost to the process completely. Furloughed apprentices are no longer receiving workplace training.

"Apprentices being made redundant and trying to support them into other apprenticeships when employers are not recruiting."

Further education college

"The fact that many apprentices are on probation or have been with the employer for less than 2 years means that they are "let go" rather than made redundant and this does not allow us to continue to support them. In any case 90 days is not a

long enough period given the prospect of finding suitable new employment is low.”

Private training provider

“Majority of the apprentices that we have contacted want to continue with EPA. However, some have already taken other jobs within another industry and may never return to their original employer. For those who do return, they will need refresher training to ensure that their skills, knowledge and behaviours are current.”

End point assessment
organisation

“Our apprentices work in hairdressing salons so cannot work at the moment.”

Private training provider

Furloughing of staff has also interrupted programmes. Communication between providers, employers, and apprentices has broken down in some cases.

.....

“Apprenticeship programmes have been stopped due to staff being put in furlough”

Employer training provider

“We are sending learners through to EPA but require an obs. Learners and employers are on furlough so unable to complete this”

Employer training provider

“Apprentices that are furloughed not being able to access work emails. Apprentices at risk of redundancies.”

Higher Education Institution

1.2. The pipeline is running dry

The apprenticeship pipeline is running dry in terms of current apprentices being lost to the system and a sharp drop off in new and future projected starts.

“New apprenticeship starts have fallen off a cliff and many of our current apprentices have been furloughed”.

Private training provider

“New enrolments delayed or cancelled Increased number of BIL [break in learning]”

.....

“I foresee the biggest problem hitting in 3-4 month when the number of new enrolments will drop considerably because employers have paused the process of reviewing, tendering, appointing providers for new programmes, combined with reduced Business Development activities due to furloughed workers or employers not wanting to discuss new starts.”

Private training provider

“unable to enrol new learners as employers putting growth on hold”
Private training provider

“recruitment for new cohorts not possible”
Local authority provider

- “No new apprenticeship starts have happened since the lockdown due to employers not having the ability to start apprentices
- All booked apprenticeship starts have been postponed causing a lack of projected income.
- There is a predicted slow uptake on apprenticeship starts after the pandemic emergency lockdown is over and currently there is nothing being done to tackle this.
- No communication for ITPs who are forecasting 0 apprenticeship starts whilst there is lockdown procedures in place.”

Private training provider

1.3. Finance and funding

Linked to the pipeline issue is the matter of funding and the future viability of many businesses in the sector.

“Funding - we deliver only to NHS staff, breaks in learning will have substantial impact.”

Private training provider

“The drop in funding from Welsh Government meaning for uncertainty around our ability to deliver to the expected requirements.”

Private training provider

“Employers when this is over will need private training providers to support employers skill their workforce to build back up the economy. Many including us may not survive, we are in the process of reviewing the future viability of our business .”

Private training provider

“As a local authority (independent) provider to schools and public sector employers all of our students have been affected, whether they are working from home, or redeployed to the emergency support or self isolating. We do not want to break their learning - it is often the only stable thing they have so we need flexibility over the delivery and funding to help us - we are entirely reliant on the levy if students don't finish in a timely way we lose 20% of their funding.”

Local authority training provider

“Lack of financial support to purchase all of the required e-learning tools required at very short notice”

Private training provider

1.4. Disruption to assessment

A major theme to emerge is the disruption caused to assessment. A feature of the lockdown being the closure of training and assessment venues. End point assessment

where a practical element is involved is the main concern as a remote alternative is not viable are not allowed. Training providers also warn that learners are unable to sit functional skills tests remotely due to invigilation rules. Many exams and assessments have been postponed.

“Completing learners that need exams for units or end of qualification and running EPA for practical assessments such as observations”

Further education college

- *“The ability to deliver functional skills exams*
- *Also issues with online tests for on programme requirements and EPA's*
- *This will impact on timely achievement rates and getting through gateway.”*

Private training provider

“EPA not happening due to social distancing - practical element involved so unable to do on-line.”

Further education college

“Ongoing contact with Employers to cover MA Reviews is problematic Access for MA's to work opportunities for evidence creation is lessening Access for all observations and face to face assessment stopped”

Further education college

“Being able to assess the competence aspect of the qualification but we are focusing on supporting the knowledge based criteria. Completing learners who have covered all aspects other than their controlled assessments for essential skills”

Subcontractor to prime training providers

“End point Assessments are being cancelled / postponed”

Employer training provider

1.5. Apprentice engagement and well-being

Training providers are sometimes finding it hard to keep apprentices engaged. There is also an increased emphasis on mental health and pastoral care.

“Learners on furlough are now losing interest in engagement.”

Private training provider

“[problems] Furloughed Workers - keeping them engaged with programme remotely whilst they are not allowed to do any work for employers.”

Private training provider

“Setting up group Zoom classes with learners (some are seeing it as extended holiday).”

Private training provider

“We are awaiting instruction from our awarding body? We are concerned they may forget the theory depending on how long they have to take between delivery and exam? We aren’t there yet so we are just dealing with delivery and supporting these young people at this time with their own mental health.”

Private training provider

“We are working hard to protect the apprentices and to support them with extra safeguarding and contact during this tricky time.”

Private training provider

“WE HAVE ALSO ARRANGED FOR A 45 MINUTE SESSION OF CBT THERAPY TO BE OPEN TO THE STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES IF NEEDED THIS AGIN IS VIA ZOOM AND IS WORKING WELL TO HELP DEAL WITH ANXIETY. USING LOTS OF FREE RESOURCES FROM SOCIAL MEDIA. ASKING EMPLOYERS TO UP LOAD TRAINING VIDIOS TO A CLOSED FACE BOOK IF THEY WOULD LIKE TO SHARE TRAINING.”

Further Education College

1.6. Some apprentices lack tech

In some instances a lack of hardware such as laptops and printers as well as internet, and digital skills, are holding operations back.

“Receiving completed documentation electronically back fro apprentices who do not have the digital skills, we current have an apprentices framework claim in the system foe Skills for Care asking for the ACE form to be uploaded. The learner has received the electronic ACE form, but they want to print to complete and post back to us. The learner does not have a printer. This adds additional work to our tutors are are very busy training apprentices remotely.”

Private training provider

“Computer/Internet Access for apprentices at home”

Further education college

“Apprentices do not have computer equipment at home that the EPA requires.”

Further education college

“[problems]Learners working from home with a lack of technology to engage with all distance learning.”

Private training provider

“Google classroom being used well, providing chromebooks to those who need them but they have to come and collect them”

Further education college

2. Solutions

There is not always a clear delineation between problems and solutions. For example, moving online is both a solution and a perennial problem for practical assessment.

2.1. Online tools and remote learning

Moving online is the most popular response by the sector and there are positive success stories. Virtual learning environments (VLE), and e-portfolios have become more prominent. Popular tools include MS Teams, Zoom, skype, and google classroom, as well as

the traditional telephone and email. Remote has replaced all aspects of operations including onboarding, delivery and where possible assessment.

Technology is often supported by new practices. One training provider found that smaller classes were more effective. The need for constant communication is often emphasized. And online tools can provide a useful audit trail for tracking engagement. Flexing rules such as a tolerance for electronic signatures further facilitates the move to remote working.

“We have an e-portfolio and VLE platform with Smart Apprentices which works brilliantly and means that much of our work can carry on with little interruption”
Further education college

“We have resolved the online delivery of technical units using Teams and Zoom. After starting out with full size classes we broke down classes into smaller groups of 5 or 6. This has helped with engagement and the results are encouraging with an increase in the quantity of work handed in”
Further education college

“Asking apprentices to use technology to record weekly what they have been undertaking, off the job training, the pressures etc we may then be able to use these as a base for discussions or questioning at a later date.”
Private training provider

“We have had the ability to deliver and operate remotely for several years. These systems were developed as part of our continuity plan for a situation such as we now find ourselves in. We are successfully delivering learning to all our apprentices and our operations and administration team are able to work from home without large scale interruption. Constant communication with our employers, apprentices and team members, giving clear and accurate information. Using online platforms such as engagement multiplier to monitor team engagement and well being.”
Private training provider

“SDS has measures in place for Review and Starts ie use of unique email or electronic signature for Reviews”
Further education college

“Work on knowledge units, undertake professional discussions over the phone/video call with the aim of undertaking direct obs in workplace when restrictions lift”
Private training provider

“We think we are handling this positively by engaging with our employers and MAs by remote means - the vast majority our MAs are very keen to use this time to do written work and learning. We are doing Zoom presentations and working with google docs and phone calls and email. We believe it is important to keep this going for many reasons including the well-being of our MAs and staff.”
Private training provider

“We started our contingency planning asap and were in contact with the EQA from the outset to get approvals for alternative delivery. We have been able to source

suitable digital solutions to most of our assessments, which means we are able to continue with these.”

“We have agreed changes to assessments with the EQA, in collaboration with the IfA. For interviews we are using a remote platform (MS Teams or Zoom) for all participants to hold a video-conference. For the multiple choice test we have agreed using an online test with remote invigilation”

End point assessment
organisation

“We use Skilsure online e-portfolio and can plan and assess as before remotely. We use Skype for Business and Zoom for team talks (we are mindful of security and do not mention learner names) We have templates for all forms that are sent and received electronically.”

Local authority training provider

2.2. Modifying delivery and assessment

Some providers are modifying delivery and assessment, for example introducing reflective journals and witness testimonies to potentially replace observation. In one case the employer was able to stand in as invigilator. However, the success of these changes is conditional on regulators flexing the rules.

“we are producing templates to aid apprentices and managers complete detailed reflective accounts and witness testimonies to potentially take the place of observations due to self distancing and isolation.”

“For some examinations we have been able to have the employer invigilate eg ICT functionals.”

Private training provider

“We have spoken to two EQA's and have, in the first instance, adapted the standard sequence of assessments for some of the standards. Employer presence at assessments has also been relaxed (somewhat) We have been advised that any deviance (apart from the above) would need to be authorised on a case by case basis.”

End point assessment
organisation

2.3. Delaying

In a couple of instances work was moved forward in anticipation of lockdown. Delaying aspects of provision and assessment is a popular strategy but cannot be done indefinitely. This includes postponing exams and introducing breaks in learning.

“Postponing the EPA until lockdown over.”

Further education college

“We have rescheduled courses with as many options as we can to keep the apprentices in study. So far this is going ok but we will need to offer a significant investment in extra coursework , marking and bridge study days to make sure that apprentices are prepared for the Sept exams - assuming these run.”

Private training provider

“Breaks In Learning for those keyworkers that are too busy/redeployed to engage in learning.”

Further education college

“Rather than cancelling the learning programme we have created a break in learning so learners can be reinstated easily with ESFA and on our learning platforms.”

Employer training provider

“Following BCS guidelines (as they are our awarding body) Moving block release dates forward while maintaining end dates Sending apprentices self study materials and planning revision catch up sessions in college when it reopens”

Further education college

3. Barriers: What does the sector want from regulators, government and other stakeholders?

The barriers follow from the problems and solutions.

3.1. Clarity

When asked what can regulators and Government do, many in the sector asked for clarity. One question that arose a multiple times was ‘When an apprentice who is paid the apprenticeship national minimum wage is furloughed (i.e. on 80% of pay), does the employer need to make up the 20%?’

“nothing as yet we just need clarity”

Further education college

“Clarification on FE exams. And depending on how long the lock down continues we need clarity on how to deal with practical units and assessment”

Further education college

“No. We are awaiting further guidance regarding exams and EPA.”

“To make it clear whether employers should pay the 20% top up to apprentices who are learning at home.”

Private training provider

“regular updates about any changes, any information on expected lift of restrictions to funding to allow for effective business planning (appreciate this is difficult for WAG to predict)”

Private training provider

“SQA need to give us some guidance. Specifically on remote signatures. Some confirmation from government on furloughed employees being able to continue knowledge based training would be appreciated. This is clarification for my employers not for us as such.”

Private training provider

Clearer guidance on who can work as often our employers can keep to the social distances when working.”

Further education college

“lack of clarity regarding support package, application on job retention scheme to public sector employers e.g. schools.”

Local authority training provider

3.2. Parity

Many in the sector feel that they are not being given the same leeway that other parts of the education system, notably GCSE and A level, have been given. Some note a difference between independent providers and colleges.

“not given the same procedures as A Levels and GCSE's.

Functionals to have the same procedures as A levels and GCSE's.

This is challenging for all involved but we do not have level playing fields with other qualifications. We need some flexibility regarding timely completions and extending planned end dates due to the current inability to undertake various tests and EPAs - none of these rules have been relaxed.”

Private training provider

“Give support to independent apprenticeship providers that is proportionate to that offered to colleges.”

Private training provider

“Like others we are looking at rent holidays and loans. ESFA support delivery funding like the Devolved areas are now doing. Support us like they do with colleges.”

Private training provider

“I FEEL THAT EPA FOR HAIRDRESSING AND BARBERING COULD CONTINUE AS A PROFESSIONAL DISCUSSION BETWEEN ASSESSOR , EMPLOYER AND APPRENTICE WITH THE EPAO AS THE QUALIFICATION HAS BEEN CLAIMED AND ASSESSMENT AND IQA HAVE BEEN ON GOING THROUGHOUT. I FEEL THAT IF GCSE GRADES CAN BE TAKEN FROM THE PAST YEARS WORK IAM SURE THAT EPA FOR HAIR CAN BE ASSESSED THROUGH PROFESSIONAL DISCUSSION . I THINK IT IS MAKING APPRENTICES THAT WERE READY AND WAITING FRUSTRATED AND DEFLATED WITH HAVING TO WAIT AFTER WORKING SO HARD TO GET TO GATEWAY”

Further education college

“Where obs are required allowing tutor and employer statements as competence abilities to meet standards FS tutors being given same abilities as GCSE tutors”

Further education college

3.3. Speed

The sector notes a need for speed. No decision or a delayed decision is itself a decision which will have consequences.

“We would like more prompt decision making from the awarding body that governs essential skills so that we can advise learners what is happening”

Subcontractor to private training providers

“The slowness to react and put in place the solutions to support private apprenticeship providers is going to result in many closing down.”

Private training provider

“OFQUAL need to be a bit quicker with helping EPAO's move to remote invigilation for Knowledge Module exams too”

Private training provider

3.4. Flexibility

There are calls for flexibility that pick up on the major themes already around assessment. Multiple providers called for a relaxation of ‘timely achievement’.

“Relax 20% over furlough so that furloughed employees can still complete their apprenticeship - possibly allow simulations for experience and support us in providing this Facilitate alternative assessment methods for modules and EPA”

Private training provider

“To offer exams and assessment remotely via video link.”

Private training provider

“We have so far submitted two specific requests offering alternatives to observation (one apprentice due to go on Maternity and another has been made redundant, the 12 week BIL [break in learning] would not be an option for either) - both requests have been rejected meaning both apprentices will not achieve EPA, the only option is to reinstate once they return to work, which for both will not be in the near future and they may require retraining before EPA can finally commence.”

Further education college

“Increase the break in learning timeframe incase the situation goes on longer than 3 months.”

Employer training provider

“Have further consideration as to an alternative to holding face to face practical tests, should the restrictions continue for a long period of time.”

End point assessment
organisation

“Allowing extra time to prevent 'timey achievement' being an issue - not just for us as an organisation but for Learners wishing to progress and maybe start uni/ college or new job.”

Local authority training provider

“Off the job training requirements in the NHS needs to be relaxed. We all know that they are learning new skills, behaviours, knowledge every day working in this crisis and other industries such as construction are faced with the same issues.”
Private training provider

3.5. Financial support

Just as finance and funding was identified as a major problem, it is a strong theme to emerge when asked what government and regulators could do to help.

“Guaranteed funding like colleges”
Private training provider

“Guarantee income for a minimum of three months, allowing independent training providers to secure quality employees and plan for a return to normalised delivery.”
Private training provider

“Support to allow us to maintain staff salaries as we need most staff to cover the extra support we are offering we are unable to use the furlough effectively Rates rebate as our building is empty and we do not qualify”
Private training provider

“EPA is usually paid on completion - It is highly unlikely that majority of the apprentices in EPA will complete any time soon, couple that with the reduction of apprentices in EPA means that EPAOs will have little to none in terms of income. Reviewing the finding model - pay per completion of individual assessments? EQA's fees should be reduced or suspended”
End point assessment
organisation

“Provide additional funds to subscribe to external VLE resources.”
Private training provider

“Like others we are looking at rent holidays and loans. ESFA support delivery funding like the Devolved areas are now doing. Support us like they do with colleges.”
Private training provider

“provide assurance on funding particularly in relation to apprenticeships/non grant funded training”
Local authority provider

“To provide financial support in terms of maintaining OPP's for learners placed i=on BIL's due to the corona virus”
Private training provider

3.6. Other stakeholders

The biggest ask was to employers and many providers noted how supportive employers have been. Many stressed the importance of good communication. When both staff at the employer and the apprentices have been put on Furlough it has sometimes been difficult to communicate, in some instances as work emails are no longer being accessed and providers can't obtain private emails. Other stakeholders include banks and landlord who are asked to extend credit and forgive rent.

"Employers are supporting as far as they can."

Private training provider

"We have good support from our employers"

Further education college

"Employers - continue communicating with us even if the business is closed. Employers - not to stop Levy payments. Employers - lend out any electric equipment such as i pads to staff where they already have them but they are just sat in a closed setting. Apprentices - continue learning and engaging, use it as an opportunity to concentrate on studies if at home."

Further education college

"Employers - Not react too quickly, understand the role that apprentices can have supporting them"

Private training provider

"Employer should not be allowed to make redundant any Apprentice."

Local authority training provider

Ask employers not to put staff on breaks in learning"

Private training provider

"employers must keep their apprentices on their training!! Help them to do that"

Local authority training provider

"Banks operate morally in providing financial support to businesses"

Private training provider

"Ask employers not to put staff on breaks in learning. More than ever we need to keep an eye (albeit remotely on young and vulnerable apprentices). Training providers can be asked to be understanding, change delivery plans, work out of hours, relax OFT requirements etc but breaks in learning will cause financial harm to the providers, prevent us continuing to support learners and reduce support for those trying to progress as apprentices."

Private training provider

"Banks - extend some credit to training providers (link it to completions or starts). Allow cash flow to help companies survive."

"Landlords can reduce rent / forgo rates etc for a short period of time if they get a payment holiday. Freehold landlords that don't have a mortgage should do this by default."

Private training provider

“Landlord should forgive rent for time not spent in the business due to full closure and working from home activities or there to be some discount provided.”

Private training provider