

Chair of the Education Panel



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Open letter to the next Mayor: Seize the moment to re-shape the FE sector

There will be many competing priorities in the first few months of your term in office. During that period, you will be in a position to re-shape the Further Education (FE) sector to help create a more dynamic and inclusive economy. As Chair of the London Area Review Steering Group, you can play a key role in ensuring that London's FE colleges deliver high quality education that prepares Londoners and businesses for the future. We want you to seize the moment.

The FE sector in London encompasses 41 Further Education Colleges and sixth form colleges, 150 independent learning providers, 400 schools that provide a sixth form and 40 Higher Education Institutes that offer some vocational qualifications. Over 500,000 learners attend these institutions for further education qualifications and they employ in excess of 16,000 staff across the FE estate. The sector is incredibly diverse, offering a range of courses for high achievers, for disadvantaged learners, adult students looking to progress or change career, and for young students who need a second chance. The sector provides a vital bridge and transition from academic life into working life.

As with many organisations across the public sector, a combination of challenges (including deep cuts in funding, changing demands from employers, the loss of maintenance grants and an ageing estate) is leading to pressure for a re-configuration of the sector. You will be aware that a national programme of Area Reviews has been established to shape that change. At the London level, you have a key role in overseeing the work of four sub-regional boards. With many external partners to rally together, your first task will be to ensure there is an agreed vision for what the FE sector in London should look like.

At a recent meeting of the London Assembly's Education Panel, we heard from a variety of expert voices. Their view was that the chief characteristics of a successful FE sector are high quality teaching and learning provision, and high

quality outcomes. The sector has to be financially viable and robust in delivery. It has to be responsive to London's current and future employers' business needs, offering the qualifications that employers seek. It has to support entrepreneurialism and it has to also provide entry and gateway qualifications for those who may have been failed by the education sector or have special learning needs or disabilities.

It is worth you noting that the majority of demand for English classes for speakers of other languages (ESOL) in the UK is in London: 210,000 working age London residents cannot speak English well and 25,000 working age London residents cannot speak English at all. Demand for ESOL however outstrips supply. Over 80% of providers nationally in 2014 had significant waiting lists of up to 1,000 students on ESOL courses. The shared vision must advocate for an FE sector that supports people to learn or improve their English.

But agreeing the shared vision may be the easy part of the review. Getting from where we are now to delivering the vision will require a sustained effort to harness the energies of many external stakeholders, in particular the governors of colleges and the educators who work in them. A clear road-map should be a key output from your first year.

The Area review must be seen as part of a wider process of devolution of skills from Central to London Government. There is a commitment from Government that by 2019, London will control the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) budget and act as Skills Commissioner. But while the intent is clear, much of the detail still remains unresolved: what does devolution actually mean in practice? Will we have a single Skills Commissioner for London? And will there be an administrative budget associated with the devolution offer? For all these questions you will need to secure answers within a short time after you take office.

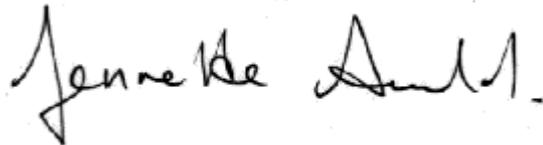
There are policies promoted by the out-going Mayor that need refreshing. The work on apprenticeships has focused on quantity not quality and to this end take-up rates have been disappointing. London needs high quality provision with a focus on higher-level apprenticeships that are appealing to students and are respected by employers. And London needs an apprenticeship system fit for its particular economic structure, which means roles that work for service sector employers and for the new clusters of financial, medical and media technology that are growing so fast. The Apprenticeship Levy will help, but you will need to ensure that the money derived from London firms is used to support apprenticeship provision here in London.

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Finally, your predecessor began the process of reviewing the need for high quality Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG – or careers advice in the old parlance) and set out a prospectus for change that was widely applauded, called “Capital Ambitions.” It is now time to turn the aspirations set out in that document into practices that will benefit students and young people looking for sound advice to guide their next steps.

There is then a substantial programme of work that is needed to take forward the devolution agenda across the skills sector and through post-16 education. These are early days in that process, but decisions taken now may set the agenda for future actions. It is because of our conviction that the FE sector provides so much to London’s economic dynamism and outstanding education sector that we want to press you to make the FE sector a priority for your first year. The sector needs a champion and you are ideally placed to take on that role.

We look forward to the day when we hear you talk about “my colleges” with pride.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jennette Arnold". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and 'A'.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM
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