

# BOLDLY ADDRESSING SECTOR SKILL SHORTAGES

**Alex Bell** explores how key partnerships between businesses and colleges are plugging a prevailing skills gap and the rising costs of higher education

## DIVERSITY RULES AT BLACKPOOL AND THE FYLDE COLLEGE

■ “Smaller class sizes ensure our learners succeed in their course and progress to highly skilled employment.” Those are the words of Blackpool and The Fylde College (B&FC) principal Alun Francis.

Collaborations struck by B&FC include cutting-edge programmes with Vodafone, Blackpool Teaching Hospital Foundation Trust and BAE Systems.

In total the college works with more than 1,800 local, national and international employers and delivers 50-plus higher education (HE) courses. It also offers degrees accredited by Lancaster University.

Francis, speaking after B&FC landed a Teaching Excellence Framework Gold rating by regulatory body the Office for Students, says this evidences how a “personalised approach with wraparound support” is working.

“Unlike more traditional universities, B&FC delivers more than 50 diverse professional and technical HE courses,” says Francis. “This includes higher and degree apprenticeships and operates over a broad church.

“Students come from a mix of backgrounds – from those coming straight from further education at 18 to students coming back into education later in life, those studying alongside employment and others who may be the first in their family to go into HE.”

Speaking about the benefits apprentices bring to workforces Sarah Hall, B&FC head of business development, says: “It doesn’t make financial sense not to.

“Apprenticeships are a productive and effective way to grow talent and develop a motivated, skilled and qualified workforce. They also allow you to future-proof your business to some extent.

## BREAKING BARRIERS: THE 5 MILLION FUTURES WAY

■ Deloitte’s 5 Million Futures (5MF) global programme includes partnerships with the North West’s Connell Co-op College, Holly Lodge Girls’ College, St Peter’s High School and Whalley Range High School for Girls 11-18.

The nucleus and social ambition of the project is to drive strong and sustainable school leadership, build digital skills to increase digital inclusion and empower under-represented groups to access the world of work.

Chris Rix, tax partner and Deloitte responsible business lead in the North West, tells *Insider*: “In July, we held a fantastic Deloitte SPARK event in Manchester for around 100 students at Whalley Range High School. The event was all about digital skills development though focusing on a sustainability challenge.

“Another event in February involved 41 students from MMU that attended our Deloitte Manchester office from local schools and colleges.

“Five large employers in the region were present, and throughout the day we had insightful knowledge-building sessions, ranging in topics from sustainability to how to pitch. The teams pitched their ideas about how to make Manchester more circular, looking at food waste and the textiles industry.”



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**Alun Francis**  
principal, B&FC

“Progress in the sector, advances in technologies, materials or processes, updated regulations and changes to consumer behaviour, can all be addressed through an apprenticeship programme. While that can’t protect your business from every eventuality, they can ensure you are well-prepared to meet any challenges head on.”



More than 638,000 people are said to have benefited from 5MF programmes in the UK. Deloitte launched the global 5MF social impact strategy in 2016 with the aim of reaching 100 million people by 2030.

"We've worked to rebuild the in-person relationship with local schools following the pandemic," adds Rix. "From our experience, the students have been incredibly engaged throughout our employability sessions and are keen to learn and ask questions about how they can apply the learning to their own job interviews, college applications and CVs. We're making an impact that matters and a positive difference to these individuals.

"Being able to have an impact in young people's lives is extremely rewarding and even the small things matter. Just simple words of encouragement or advice can change people's life trajectory to make more informed decisions about their career."

## A GROWING NUMBER-CRUNCHING ACADEMY

■ Learning the very basics of what makes a great all round business adviser is a crucial aspect of Cowgills Academy.

The independent firm of accountants and business advisers launched its academy last year and partners with Rivington and Blackrod High School and Sixth Form, Bolton School and Cannon Slade School

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**Graham Weights**  
[Ainscough Crane Hire](#)

and Sixth Form. Head of people at Cowgills Lisa Kershaw says recruiting in this competitive market is tough.

"The graduate market was an area that, in the past, we had always had a great deal of success with," she says. "In fact, two of our partners joined Cowgills on our graduate scheme. However, with many of the 'big four' now sponsoring some of the leading universities' accountancy courses the competition is rife. We have had to look at other entry levels in order to continue the growth of the business."

Kershaw points out that over the years Cowgills has discovered that some crucial teachings are being overlooked in accountancy training. "Skills such as bookkeeping and accounts preparation," she adds. "While the trainees that come through our doors get a brilliant understanding of how each of our service sectors work, they now learn the very basics of what makes a great all round business adviser. This is particularly appealing to those leaving college as it offers a more structured path into accountancy."

Over the last two years the Cowgills Academy has recruited more than

20 trainees at graduate and college-leaver level. According to Kershaw, it stems from having a breadth of talent on the firm's doorstep.

"We have partnered with local colleges, working closely with teachers, and students, attending and speaking at career days, carrying out mock interviews and inviting them into the business for work experience," she says.

"Our current Cowgills Academy students have worked with the college students, offering real life experience to college leavers exploring their career options. Students are then given the opportunity to apply for a place within our scheme.

"Students study part time at college in qualifications including ACA and AAT, which are fully funded by Cowgills. There are then further opportunities to enhance their careers with a clear success pathway."

## INNOVATIVE, TARGETED AND TAILORED

■ For Graham Weights there's only one way to properly plug sector-specific skills gaps.

"Be bold and if you see a skill shortage in your sector, do what you can to address it by creating a targeted apprenticeship programme," says Weights, head of engineering at Ainscough Crane Hire.

"The construction industry is facing major recruitment challenges due to a variety of issues, from an ageing workforce to the changing labour markets as a result of leaving the European Union. It's absolutely crucial training programmes are put into place now to ensure we get more young people into construction.

"Earlier this year, we launched our first ever crane operator apprentice programme. Our intake has a wide geographic spread, with some becoming the second generation of their family to work at Ainscough. It's also pleasing that we're seeing more and more female recruits."

Ainscough's apprenticeship schemes are delivered in partnership with Myerscough College in Preston and the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB).

A mobile crane features permanently at the college's £4.4m Engineering Centre to enhance the apprentices' learning experience. ■