



Bill Watkin is the Chief Executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association (SFCA) which represents all 90 colleges in England. It is the voice of all those providing sixth form education to 16 to 19 year olds, which includes academies, schools and free schools. Here Bill tells **agenda** about his own path into education and the challenges he faces in his role.

What was your background before taking on your current role at the Sixth Form Colleges Association?

I started out teaching MFL in various schools in the London area. I remember my first job being something of a baptism of fire. It was in a Social Priority Allowance school – a strategy to incentivise teachers to work in particularly challenging situations – where I developed practices that stood me in good stead over the years, as well as a consciousness of the importance of education as a lever for social mobility, and a love of teaching that has never left me.

After over 20 years in schools, I joined SSAT, a national membership association of thousands of schools, where I stayed for 10 years. My role was Head of the Academies Programme and I was responsible for delivering the government's well-structured, and well-funded, support programme for a small, targeted number of schools facing the most entrenched difficulties and serving the most disadvantaged communities.

This was a time before the opening up of academy status as an aspirational pathway for high-performing schools; it was a morally-driven and determined effort to ensure that thousands of young people in schools that had been underperforming for generations, could experience a transformation in their education. The programme has, of course, morphed into something else

now, with outstanding converters, MATs playing the middle-tier role, and its very scale making it very hard to even keep in sight the original stages of the journey, but I know from first-hand experience just how important those early days were to many young people.

What do you like about working in the field of education?

Whether working in a school or college, or working in a representative association, I have always loved the variety – no two days, no two hours are ever the same! And yet this variety, of providers, ideas, demands, needs, challenges, opportunities, people, styles, sits alongside a common core belief and purpose: young people are interesting, they are our future, and they deserve nothing less than the best.

Who do you admire in your field?

One of the delights of my work in the last twelve years has been the opportunity to travel around the country, visiting colleges and schools, and witnessing the extraordinary things that are being done, in so many ways, in countless places and by so many people: students, teachers, leaders and governors.

That makes it difficult to single out particular individuals. But I must mention Lesley King, a former Headteacher and my boss at SSAT. She taught me so much about working in a national context, about moral integrity, and about working

with the full gamut of stakeholders, from members to ministers. And I must also mention James Kewin and the small, but extraordinarily effective team at SFCA, whose tireless determination to serve the needs of all sixth form colleges with skill, sensitivity and passion, make a real difference to the education landscape.

Was your own experience of education a positive one and what lessons did you learn from it?

I was taken to Paddington station by my parents and put on a train, with my trunk, to Shrewsbury (the train lines have changed now, of course!) at the age of 7. For the next five years, I endured a fairly barbaric and violent experience of education, in which I suspect I suffered less than some because I was good at sports and, rather bizarrely, even better at Latin.

I learned that schooling is a complex social activity and that good pedagogy can take different forms. Take art, for example... every week we had to learn, for a test (woe betide those who failed), the title, artist and date of 20 works of art depicted on post cards suspended with bulldog clips at the back of the classroom, with a different set of cards each week. Compare this with the maverick art teacher who inspired a love of art by playing Sergeant Pepper and discussing Peter Blake's and Jann Howarth's album cover graphics every lesson for a term!

What do you do when – if – you have time off?

I cycle as much as I can, and I am learning to play the ukulele – but I am still appallingly bad at it.

What is the remit of the Sixth Form Colleges Association?

The Sixth Form Colleges Association is the established voice of dedicated sixth form education and the hub of a national network of sixth form colleges. Our vision is of a growing and thriving sector that will:

- Continue to be high performing, highly efficient and deliver outstanding outcomes for learners
- Continue to play an active and influential role in shaping 16-19 education policy, funding and curriculum
- Be recognised and valued as the most successful providers of 16-19 education
- Be recognised and valued by government as an invaluable asset to the education system.

How do you meet the needs of your members/those you represent?

- **Representing our members:** particularly in discussions and negotiations with trade unions and officials from government departments and agencies
- **Promoting our members:** to a wide range of stakeholders including the media, politicians and potential students
- **Supporting our members:** on a range of issues through the provision of research, resources, guidance and one to one advice.

What are the greatest challenges that your organisation faces over the next five years?

The current low funding levels mean that sixth forms, whether in schools or colleges, are stretched to breaking point. Indeed, some schools have already had to close their sixth form; some colleges have had to merge. The survivors need to be bigger in order to be financially viable; they need larger classes if they are to avoid having to cut some subjects from the curriculum. And they are being asked to do more with

less. For example, the government recently launched its careers guidance, which places an additional burden on sixth forms, but which has no funding attached to it.

As inflation rises, as public sector pay is no longer subject to a freeze, as pension and NI contributions increase, staff salaries will come under scrutiny and, unless wage rises are funded, industrial relations will feel the strain.

Curriculum changes continue to make themselves felt, with linear A levels increasingly the norm, with the exam cliff edge of Applied Generals deterring many from switching to the new format, with T levels drawing ever closer and with the government encouraging a greater focus on apprenticeships.

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Sixth form colleges will be keeping their curriculum under close review and working to ensure breadth and balance, the protection of 'minority' subjects, a full range of qualifications to meet the needs of young people and the labour market, and cohorts of young people equipped with the knowledge and skills to serve them well at university.

What achievement are you proudest of as Chief Executive?

I am delighted that sixth form colleges are sticking together as a tight-knit family. They are not a universally homogenous group; they serve different communities; they offer different curricula; some of them have recently become academies. But their common purpose remains undiminished and their sense of family, of mutual support, of loyalty to the sector is a wonderful thing to see. Indeed, not only have some rather doom-laden predictions of fragmentation of the sector proven unfounded, but we have been pleased to report a 10 per cent growth in our membership.

This is all about specialist experts in a specialised field, sharing similar challenges and opportunities and recognising that, whether informing policy decisions or shaping sixth form pedagogy, they are stronger together.

If you were stuck in a lift with a government minister, what three things would you ask for on behalf of your sector?

The #SupportOurSixthformers campaign has succeeded in securing a broad understanding that the funding levels of sixth form education are unacceptable and unsustainable. We are damaging the educational experience of all sixth formers in the state sector, with teaching time cut to a half of that available to young people in Singapore, Shanghai, New South Wales and Canada; with pastoral support, mental health services, careers guidance and enrichment opportunities all increasingly at risk. So my first ask is for funding, not because it would be a nice to have, but because the lack of funding damages our standing as a competitor in the global market; not because without it, social mobility will not happen, but because society and the economy needs people with A levels and degrees to be the scientists, doctors and business leaders of the future.

Secondly, Applied General qualifications are once again under review and we seem to be heading in the direction of a binary choice for 16 year olds: A level or T level. This would be catastrophic for many young people, and Applied Generals must be accepted as a valid and valuable route in an academic curriculum for students working towards university.

Thirdly, the access arrangements for English and maths resits in colleges. Students are assessed in Year 10 and their needs are identified and special arrangements are put in place for when they sit the exams at 16. If they fail and then go on to a college where they take a resit, the college must re-assess the student, identify the needs and clear the special arrangements from scratch – all in time for the resit date in November. This is absurd and can so easily be fixed.