Witness Name: Carmel Grant
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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF CARMEL GRANT

I, Carmel Grant, will say as follows:

1. I was the Acting Chief Executive at the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE). I held this position from 1 February until its closure on 31 May 2025. In this role, I led IfATE in its final four months before closure and the transfer of functions to Skills England and the Department for Education (DfE).

2. Prior to becoming Acting Chief Executive, I was employed as Skills Delivery Director for IfATE from 1 August 2024 to 31 January 2025 with responsibility for apprenticeship and qualifications portfolios. Between 1 January 2020 to 28 June 2022 (the "Specified Period" of the Inquiry) I was Deputy Director Qualification Implementation, responsible for delivery of technical qualifications.

3. Many of the specific questions posed by the Inquiry are outside my personal knowledge. To help prepare this statement, I commissioned a review of IfATE's records and made enquiries of those who were closer to the detail than I am, including members of the senior leadership team in place at the time. I draw on that material in this statement.

4. As the Inquiry may be aware, an Act to abolish IfATE and transfer its functions to the Secretary of State for Education received royal assent on 15 May 2025 and, as from 1 June 2025, IfATE ceased to exist. At the time of preparing this

statement, the process of winding down and transferring IfATE was advanced and, as a result, many of the staff who were directly involved (particularly at the most senior level) during the Specified Period had left. Nevertheless, I hope this witness statement will give the Inquiry the information it needs, and I would be happy to provide clarification of any of the points that follow.

Introduction

5. We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry's important work in understanding the impact of the pandemic and measures taken in response to the pandemic with regard to children and young people.

6. It may be helpful to begin by explaining, in general terms, the different functions involved in the creation and delivery of education and training to children and young people that leads to a qualification, and where IfATE fits into the system.

7. The first step in creating a qualification is identifying that a need or demand for that qualification exists. This was part of IfATE's role within its particular area of responsibility, that is apprenticeships and technical education. Technical education encompasses any training or education that focuses on progression into skilled employment and requires the acquisition of both technical knowledge and practical skills and behaviours valued by employers. As well as apprenticeships, technical education includes qualifications such as T levels and other types of technical qualifications.

8. This first step is followed by standard setting. This means determining what knowledge, skills and/or behaviours are required for a particular qualification. This was also part of IfATE's role, again, within its particular area of responsibility. We drew on groups of employers to create and publish "occupational standards" as our qualifications related to the needs of skilled occupations in the workplace. Occupational standards are the basis for all apprenticeships and technical qualifications. Qualifications are set at different levels demonstrating increasing proficiency, from levels 1 and 2 (GCSE equivalent) to levels 7 and 8 (masters/postgraduate equivalent). Qualifications

sit within a national framework in each of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. IfATE's role relates to the qualifications framework for England.

9. The next step is examination or assessment design. An examination or assessment is the practical way in which a student demonstrates they have met the standard required for a particular qualification. This is done by "awarding bodies" and is where the assessment of an individual student's performance against the required standard takes place. Qualifications are awarded to students who are successfully assessed. The development of assessment plans for apprenticeship standards, known as "end-point assessment" (EPA), was also part of IfATE's role, again working with groups of employers. Currently, all apprentices must take an independent assessment at the end of their training to confirm they have achieved occupational competence. Rigorous, robust and independent assessment is essential to giving employers confidence that apprentices completing an apprenticeship standard can perform in the occupation they have been trained in and can demonstrate the knowledge, skills and behaviours set out in the standard.

10. The final step in the process is the delivery of education or training so that a student can acquire the knowledge, skills and/or behaviours to be successful in the assessment for their qualification of choice. This is where the actual education and contact with the student takes place. It will involve schools, colleges, employers (in the case of work-based learning) and other educational settings and providers.

11. Sitting alongside this chain are regulators, including Ofqual, which regulates most awarding bodies outside of higher education, the Office for Students (OfS), which regulates the higher education sector, and Ofsted, which regulates many education providers outside of higher education.

12. IfATE acted essentially as a standards setting body, with elements of a regulatory function, as set out more fully below. It therefore had no direct involvement in the day-to-day education or assessment of students. For that reason, in preparing this statement, we did not have all of the information sought by the Inquiry and would not wish to express an opinion on some of the

questions posed where these would be more authoritatively addressed by other bodies.

13. IfATE's annual report 2021-2022 includes a table that sets out the responsibilities of the different bodies with whom we worked. I exhibit the IfATE Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2022 as my exhibit **(CG/01 - INQ000646083)**; the Inquiry may find page 15 of the exhibit a helpful overview of the situation during the pandemic. The DfE (via the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) up to 31 March 2022) was responsible for the quality of training providers and operated a register of approved training providers. Ofsted and the OfS conducted inspections with regard to the quality of apprenticeship training offered by those providers. IfATE's role in quality was limited to standard setting and advising the Secretary of State on the appropriate level of funding for each apprenticeship. However, the fact that employers were required to secure IfATE approval for their training standard, and only training towards IfATE-approved standards was fundable via the apprenticeship levy, provided an important quality safeguard.

14. The final thing to note in this introduction is that, as the Inquiry will be aware, apprenticeships are not only taken by young people. Approximately half of apprentices are aged over the Inquiry's cut-off point of interest.

PART A – ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The role, remit, purpose and geographical reach of IfATE

15. IfATE was established on 1 April 2017 as a Crown non-departmental public body sponsored by the DfE. At that time it was known as the Institute for Apprenticeships. The Enterprise Act 2016 amended the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (ASCLA) inserting s.ZA1 and established IfATE as a statutory body corporate, with the powers to approve and publish apprenticeship standards and assessment plans, as well as a duty to keep under review education and training within its remit.

16. In 2019, the Institute for Apprenticeships was renamed the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) by amendments made to ASCLA by the Technical and Further Education Act 2017, which expanded IfATE's remit to include technical education. This included T levels and subsequent reforms to qualifications from levels 2 to 5.

17. Reference should be made to ASCLA (prior to its amendment by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Act 2025 which transferred IfATE's functions to the Secretary of State for Education and abolished IfATE) for IfATE's full functions, but in summary, these included:

- To publish standards in relation to England for such occupations as IfATE considered appropriate (s.ZA11)
- To publish apprenticeship assessment plans in respect of such standards published under section ZA11 as IfATE considered appropriate (s.A2)
- To secure that evaluations were carried out of the quality of apprenticeship assessments provided by persons in relation to assessment plans published under section A2 (s.A2B)
- To take certain actions if the quality of any apprenticeship assessment provided by a person was or may have become unsatisfactory (s.A2C)
- To approve certain technical education qualifications (s.A2D3 and A2D5)

18. In addition, IfATE was also required to provide the Secretary of State for Education with advice and assistance in connection with the Secretary of State's functions, including recommendations in relation to the funding of apprenticeships.

19. As education and skills are a devolved matter, IfATE's remit extended to England only.

20. Schedule A1 to ASCLA set out how IfATE was constituted, including membership, tenure and pay of non-executive members, appointment of the chief executive and other staff, committees, procedure, supplementary powers, and requirements relating to accounts, seal, and funding.

21. In practice, IfATE facilitated groups of employers (known as "trailblazer groups") to create occupational standards by setting out what knowledge, skills, and behaviours needed to be demonstrated for someone to be capable in a particular skilled role. As referenced earlier, these occupational standards are the foundation for all apprenticeships and technical qualifications, including T levels, higher technical qualifications (HTQs), and other technical education qualifications at levels 2 and 3.

22. Additionally, IfATE had a limited communication and convening function, including developing and maintaining occupational maps. The occupational maps are a publicly available online interactive tool. They articulate how training and occupations can fit together, and how career progression can be navigated.

23. IfATE was required to keep under review education and training within its remit. It was also required to consider, when discharging its functions:

- the reasonable requirements of employers, industry and learners and potential learners
- the quality of provision of technical education within IfATE's remit
- the need to ensure that education and training within IfATE's remit represented good value for money
- any information provided by any person designated by the Secretary of State for Education (s.ZA2)

24. IfATE worked closely with the DfE, which set strategic apprenticeship and technical qualification policy. ASCLA also provided that the Secretary of State for Education might give a notice to IfATE setting out other matters to which IfATE should have regard when exercising its functions. These notices took the form of annual strategic guidance issued by the Secretary of State for Education. I exhibit the annual strategic guidance for IfATE as my exhibits **(CG/02 - INQ000646084)** for the 2019 guidance, **(CG/03 - INQ000646085)** for

the 2020 guidance, **(CG/04 - INQ000646086)** for the 2021 guidance, and **(CG/05 - INQ000646087)** for the 2022 guidance.

25. In delivering its remit, IfATE worked closely with a range of other stakeholders who delivered related functions. These included awarding organisations, which are responsible for developing technical qualifications (for IfATE approval), as well as Ofsted, Ofqual, and the Office for Students (OfS), whose functions are described in paragraphs 11 and 13. Relationships with Ofqual and the OfS were governed by a memorandum of understanding and framework document. IfATE had a direct contractual relationship with awarding organisations, where those awarding organisations held the contract for delivery of T levels.

Numbers of young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education during the Specified Period

26. The House of Commons has produced a paper on apprenticeship statistics which the Inquiry may find useful. I exhibit this paper as my exhibit **(CG/06 - INQ000646088).** Page 7 of that report shows apprentice starts by year for the Specified Period and a number of years on either side. It can be seen that, after a high point of annual starts in the range 440,000-521,000 in the years 2010/11 to 2016/17, annual starts in 2018/19 were 393,000, declining further to 323,000 in 2019/20 and 321,000 in 2020/21. (Page 8 of this document explains that 45-50% of these would be people aged over 25 and so outside the scope of this module.)

27. Apprenticeship completion data can be seen at page 14 of this document and shows a broadly similar pattern to starts with a real but fairly modest decline.

28. Lastly on apprenticeships, page 15 shows participation, and the same picture emerges of a decline from a high point some time before the pandemic, and a real but relatively modest effect during the pandemic.

29. It is, however, very difficult to assess the extent to which this decline can be attributed to the pandemic. As noted above, there had been a slight declining trend prior to the Specified Period. The DfE has prepared a report which

concluded that Covid was one of three main factors which influenced this trend, the other two being the transition to employer-led apprenticeship standards (with apprenticeships being of higher quality, longer duration and with more off-the-job learning and rigorous assessment) and the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. The report showed a marked reduction in apprentice starts between March and October 2020, with other months being broadly in line with other years. I exhibit a summary of this report as my exhibit **(CG/07 - INQ000646089)**.

30. Some data on T levels for the Specified Period can be found in the DfE T Level Action Plan 2021. The numbers reflect that T levels were a new qualification that were available through a limited number of schools and colleges at that point. Page 11 records 1,300 students enrolled on a T level and 950 students enrolled on a T level transition programme in September 2020 and c 5,450 T level students and c 3,550 T level transition programme students as at October 2021. I exhibit the DfE 2021 T Level Action Plan as my exhibit **(CG/08 - INQ000646090).**

IfATE's responsibilities in respect of young people's access to apprenticeships and technical education

31. IfATE did not have any formal statutory function in respect of young people's access to apprenticeships or technical qualifications. As noted above, it was a standard setting body rather than a commissioning or delivery body. Strictly, provided it set and made available suitable standards, it fulfilled its role.

32. However, when discharging its functions, IfATE's general duties included an obligation to have regard to the reasonable requirements of those who may wish to undertake education and training. Furthermore, as a public body, we were mindful of our obligation under the Public Sector Equality Duty. As part of standard setting and our approval processes, we considered the need to make sure qualifications were accessible and appealing to all.

33. In 2019, IfATE's Board agreed a four-year diversity and inclusion strategy. This resulted in changes to the accessibility of our products by, for example,

ensuring apprenticeship standards were tested for gender neutral language. In 2022, we also achieved level 3 disability confident accreditation.

34. To further this work, in September 2021, the Board established an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, constituting four Board members. The Committee's aim was to promote the accessibility of the technical education landscape and support IfATE's ambition to embed equity, diversity and inclusion as a mainstream of all IfATE business, influencing (and being informed by) external stakeholders to drive accessibility in technical education as a system aspiration. The Committee's work led, in March 2023, to the publication of an equity, diversity, and inclusion strategy and toolkit setting out IfATE's role in widening opportunity through technical education. I exhibit this strategy as my exhibit **(CG/09 - INQ000646091).**

IfATE's responsibilities in respect of the practical delivery of education and training to young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education

35. IfATE did not have a role to regulate or report on practical delivery of education and training.

IfATE's responsibilities in respect of the quality of education and training to young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education

36. IfATE was required, when exercising its functions, to have regard to the need to ensure that education and training within its remit was of an appropriate quality. We chaired a group of regulatory bodies, including the ESFA, Ofsted, Ofqual, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the OfS, which together published a Quality Strategy that sets out best practice expectations before, during, and after apprenticeships. I exhibit this strategy as my exhibit **(CG/10 - INQ000646092).**

37. We also published our own quality statement which described what we considered to be high quality in an apprenticeship. I exhibit this statement as my exhibit **(CG/11 - INQ000646093).** We did not have a role to regulate the quality of education or training delivery.

IfATE's responsibilities in respect of the learning and attainment of young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education

38. By setting the appropriate standards for apprenticeships or approving technical education, working closely with employers to understand the skills needs of different occupations, we ensured that young people undertaking apprenticeships or technical education had the appropriate level of learning and attainment. In other words, it was our role to ensure that these qualifications were worthwhile to learners and to people who might employ them.

39. We also had a statutory role in ensuring apprenticeship assessment was of suitable quality as we approved assessment plans and arranged for evaluations of the quality of assessments.

40. ASCLA provided that IfATE could carry out evaluations of apprenticeship assessment or make arrangements for other persons to do so. Prior to 2023, quality assurance was broadly provided by:

- Ofqual
- Professional bodies
- Employer groups
- Quality Assurance Agency
- IfATE (via a contractor known as Open Awards)

IfATE's responsibilities in respect of the wellbeing of young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education

41. IfATE did not have such a role in any direct sense. We did not educate young people ourselves, or secure their education, or examine them for qualifications.

42. Indirectly, we were concerned with welfare in a number of ways. We had to have regard to the reasonable requirements of persons who may wish to undertake education and training, which required consideration of factors such

as accessibility of apprenticeships that met our standards. We were also subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty, which required us proactively to consider the need to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity; our EDI strategy applied in relation to socio-economic status as well as in relation to those with protected characteristics under the Equality Act.

43. To help us understand the apprentice experience, we engaged with the views of apprentices via IfATE's Apprentice Panel. The panel was set up by IfATE's Board to receive feedback on the performance of apprenticeships in England and recommendations for their improvement, particularly in relation to those aspects for which IfATE was responsible. Panel members generated thinking, ideas and evidence on a range of issues that impacted the apprentice experience and apprenticeship opportunities. In 2020 and 2022, the panel conducted national surveys of apprentices, seeking views on their experience, including, in the first survey, the impact of Covid. I exhibit the report on the 2020 survey as my exhibit **(CG/12 - INQ000646094)** and the report on the 2022 survey as my exhibit (**CG/13 - INQ000646095).**

44. The surveys led to the creation of an online tool intended to be used as an "apprenticeship starter pack". The tool set out good practice in areas including how training providers and employers could best work together to support apprentices' wellbeing.

45. The Apprentice Panel also made an important contribution to the development of IfATE's inclusion strategy, whose purpose was to ensure opportunities existed for people from all backgrounds

IfATE's responsibilities in respect of engagement with the views expressed by representatives of young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education

46. We routinely referred to IfATE's Apprentice Panel to help us understand the needs and views of learners (although, as noted above, apprentices cannot simply be equated to young people). The panel's membership included apprentices from diverse backgrounds and from across all sectors and levels of

learning. I exhibit the panel's terms of reference as my exhibit **(CG/14 - INQ000646096); (CG/14a - INQ000646097).**

47. The different experiences of Apprentice Panel members helped inform all areas of our work. Panel members attended IfATE Board meetings to update on panel activity and offer advice and challenge on relevant issues. From time to time, they also met with ministers and other government officials, helping ensure that new policies took account of what mattered to apprentices.

48. As well as feeding into IfATE's work, the panel collaborated with other agencies, such as Ofqual and UCAS, helping improve their apprentice-facing services and policies.

49. When T levels were launched in September 2020, IfATE established a TQ student forum for students studying technical qualifications. Forum members met periodically to share first-hand insights into what it was like to be a TQ student. Their feedback helped IfATE to test its thinking on new policy and identify ways of improving technical qualifications so that students had a positive and valuable experience of learning.

IfATE's responsibilities in respect of the quality and availability of young people's accommodation whilst they are undertaking apprenticeships and technical education

50. We had no role or responsibility for this area.

IfATE's responsibilities in respect of young people's employability and future work prospects after completing apprenticeships and technical education

51. Both apprenticeships and technical education are intended to develop and certify work-relevant skills and knowledge and thus to develop and certify employability. We ensured our occupational standards and any qualifications we approved were relevant to the workplace, designed to address industry need, and enabled individuals to progress in a chosen career. In that sense, we

had a role in developing employability, although, of course, it was still necessary for other bodies to fund education and training and/or make it available.

52. To ensure apprenticeships (and other technical education qualifications) delivered the knowledge and skills apprentices would need to succeed and progress in the current and future workplace, we worked with employer groups and sector bodies to identify and anticipate emerging occupational trends and employer needs. We created a number of frameworks to support the development of occupational standards that reflected these trends, including:

- the Digital Skills and Characteristics Framework (guidance on digital characteristics in an occupational context and across occupational levels for problem-solving, digital collaboration and communication, transacting, organisational security and handling data securely) **(exhibit CG/15 - INQ000646098)**; **(CG/15a - INQ000646099)**
- the Sustainability Framework (guidance on general and specific green skills) **(exhibit CG/16 - INQ000646100); (CG16a - INQ000646101)**
- the Creative Competencies Toolkit (guidance on the creative skills that are fundamental to improved productivity in the workplace, regardless of employment sector) **(exhibit CG/17 - INQ000646102); (CG/17a - INQ000646103)**.

IfATE's relationship with:

a. **The UK Government**
b. **Any other key stakeholders in the sector**

53. IfATE was an arm's length body sponsored by the DfE. We were funded by the DfE and subject to strategic direction from ministers. Our relationship was described by a framework document, the most recent version of which I exhibit as my exhibit **(CG/18 - INQ000646104)**. We were required to report to Parliament annually and could be summoned to give evidence to the Public Accounts Committee or the Education Select Committee. We were, however, operationally independent of government.

54. IfATE worked closely with employers through 15 route panels, one for each major business sector. The route panels consisted of senior individuals within the relevant sectors whose responsibilities were to:

- provide a collective, strategic view of current and future skills needs in their sector
- review and make recommendations on the quality and relevance of skills training for their sector – including new apprenticeships and technical qualifications
- help map skills training opportunities in their sector, making it easier to see what's available, supporting career progression and highlighting gaps
- oversee regular reviews to ensure skills training continues to meet employer needs in their sector
- provide feedback and insight that inform IfATE and wider government policy
- act as ambassadors for technical education and the benefits for employers

55. We also worked with thousands of employers through the trailblazer groups which prepared standards and assessment plans, and in the development of T Levels; employer insight and feedback fed into the development of all of these products. As noted above, we chaired a group of regulators who published a Quality Strategy, and we worked with those regulators to avoid duplication and seek to ensure our work was joined up, while maintaining appropriate independence.

PART B – PRE-PANDEMIC PLANNING

Any planning IfATE is aware was carried out prior to January 2020 which considered the impact of the response to a pandemic or any other civil emergency on young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education

56. IfATE had robust procedures in place for business continuity planning and risk management. We also had facilities for staff to work remotely if needed and

were able to mobilise these to ensure operations continued during lockdown. A global pandemic was not considered as one of IfATE's business continuity scenarios.

57. Apprenticeships and technical education pose very different challenges in this context. Apprentices are employed, and their experience of education in the pandemic would largely have depended on what measures were being put in place that affected the UK workforce at large (although those undertaking elements of training with external providers may also have been affected by provider-led measures). Most other types of technical education are delivered in an educational setting, and an individual's experience would largely have depended on what measures were being put in place that affected the UK's educational institutions.

IfATE's awareness of any coordinated planning that took place for how employers and educational establishments would discharge their responsibilities to young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education in the event that the situation emerging from January 2020 developed into a pandemic

58. Schools, colleges and training providers followed guidance from the DfE with regard to the delivery of education and training during the Specified Period. Where training could not continue in a workplace, training providers were encouraged to re-programme apprentice training to cover knowledge elements in online classes and delay elements of skill acquisition until those workplaces were re-opened.

59. IfATE coordinated its own planning internally with DfE, Ofqual, OfS, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, and the Federation of Awarding Bodies. This planning related specifically to how apprenticeship end-point assessment (EPA) could be adapted to respond to the changing circumstances of lockdown (since it was immediately apparent that, without change, delivery of some assessment methods used in some EPAs would be untenable). The ESFA was responsible for changes to training provision.

60. Unlike GCSEs and A levels, where examinations happen in large numbers at set times of the year, apprenticeships are a work-based programme, with apprentices being recruited by an employer, trained and taking their EPAs throughout the year. Completing the EPA successfully demonstrates to employers that the apprentice is fully competent in their chosen occupation and can be employed in that role. In many cases, completing EPA is the moment at which the apprentice becomes an employee on the same terms as their peers. For young people undertaking an apprenticeship on the apprenticeship minimum wage, completing EPA is also the moment at which their wages increase to match those of their fully qualified peers.

61. It was important, therefore, for IfATE to move quickly to minimise the impact of lockdown on apprentices who were near the end of their training period and due to sit their EPAs.

62. Our priority was to enable apprentices to complete their apprenticeship EPA wherever possible and to do so in a way that was safe and maintained quality. We worked intensively with providers, colleges, and employer groups to develop an appropriate response that would minimise the impact of lockdown on apprentices as much as possible, sustain employer confidence in the rigour of assessment outcomes and stand the test of time in terms of processes that might continue into the future.

63. On 23 March 2020, IfATE published, on its website, ten EPA "flexibilities" available to all apprenticeships. These flexibilities allowed:

- observations to take place in simulated environments
- remote delivery of assessment (including invigilation)
- pauses between assessment methods during EPA period
- assessments to take place outside of usual venues
- delivery of assessment methods in any order (when a specified order is in the assessment plan)
- exams/tests to be online instead of on paper (where originally specified as paper-based only)

- gateway sign-off to be done remotely (where originally specified as having to be face to face) (gateway being the point at which the employer and training provider agree the apprentice has gained the required knowledge, skills, and behaviours to proceed to assessment)
- changes to be made to who sits on the EPA interview/discussion panel
- other suitable evidence of achievements to be used in replacement of functional skills qualifications at gateway
- extension to the length of the EPA period (where specified)

64. I exhibit the flexibilities guidance as it stood in 2021 as my exhibit **(CG/19 - INQ000646105)**.

65. Flexibilities allowed for delivery of the assessment method to deviate from how it was set out in the assessment plan, without fundamentally changing the assessment method. The flexibilities particularly benefited older assessment plans (which were more prescriptive than more recent plans, where flexibilities, such as remote observation had already been built in). The flexibilities were considered low risk or risk free to the integrity of the award and could be applied by end-point assessment organisations (EPAOs) at their discretion, without seeking IfATE's approval first (for example, where assessments normally conducted face to face could reasonably be done online). Flexibilities unblocked a lot of assessments that would otherwise have been untenable, enabling EPAOs to move quickly to put alternative arrangements in place so that apprentices could complete their apprenticeship.

66. In some cases, flexibilities alone were not sufficient to allow EPA to continue (usually when observation was not possible at all). In those circumstances, IfATE took a more bespoke approach, convening a taskforce, including chairs of relevant trailblazer groups (who developed the apprenticeship), EPAOs, external quality assurance providers (who quality assure the assessments) and IfATE officials to determine an alternative, temporary change to the assessment method(s). These changes were known as "discretions". A fast-track sign-off process involving senior IfATE officials working to agreed principles enabled rapid approval and implementation.

67. IfATE considered discretions on a standard-by-standard basis, prioritising those standards linked to (keyworker) occupations identified as critical to the Covid response. They included LGV driver, train driver, healthcare worker, dental nurse, and pharmacy services assistant. In all, IfATE approved temporary discretions for some 66 apprenticeship standards. I exhibit a list of these standards as my exhibit **(CG/24 - INQ000646110).**

68. To understand how flexibilities and discretions had worked, and to identify lessons to help improve EPA in future, in March 2021, IfATE undertook extensive stakeholder engagement, including deep-dive research conducted by Ipsos Mori, an online stakeholder survey of employers, providers and others, and one-to-one and roundtable discussions with key employers, EPAOs and universities. I exhibit this Ipsos Mori research as my exhibit **(CG/20 - INQ000646106)** and a report on the outcome of roundtable discussions as my exhibit **(CG/21 - INQ000646107)**. I also exhibit the outcome of the online survey as my exhibit **(CG/31 - INQ000646119).**

69. The Ipsos Mori research considered the impact of the flexibilities granted up until January 2021. The research highlighted positive feedback from stakeholders (including learners) about the timeliness of IfATE's initial response, communication and the clarity of the guidance that was issued.

70. Our own survey and roundtable discussions also showed that stakeholders welcomed the flexibilities IfATE had put in place and highlighted a number of positive impacts, including improved and closer working relationships between employers and EPAOs, successful adoption of remote delivery methods, and greater innovation in assessment delivery, with a sustained shift to digital by default. EPAOs and employers felt better prepared for successive lockdowns, having applied lessons learned from the first lockdown. Stakeholder feedback on the various flexibilities led to IfATE's decision to retain seven of the ten measures post-Covid for discretionary use by EPAOs where these would be in the interests of learners.

71. In August 2021, IfATE gave notice that apprenticeship flexibilities and temporary discretions introduced to support the sector through Covid-19 would run until the end of 2021, subject to the progress of the pandemic (in the end, the deadline was extended several times to reflect the ongoing nature of the pandemic and the continued need for flexibilities). I exhibit this notice as my exhibit **(CG/22 - INQ000646108).**

72. In making this announcement, IfATE aimed to provide stability in the face of Covid's continuing impact so that employers, providers and apprentices could plan with certainty and confidence. The announcement also confirmed the continuation of optional flexibilities post-Covid. Ultimately, lockdown flexibilities formally came to an end on 31 March 2022, when IfATE advised, wherever possible, that from 1 April 2022 apprentices should continue with scheduled EPAs in line with requirements set out in the approved and published EPA plan. Temporary discretions continued to 30 June 2022. I exhibit this advice as my exhibit **(CG/23 - INQ000646109)**.

73. Although assessments initially reduced during lockdown (with impact varying by sector, particularly in occupations such as dental nurse, where safety was a major factor), the flexibilities extended by IfATE to all apprenticeships to mitigate its impact (and, in large part, retained) meant that, by the end of Covid, more assessments were taking place than prior to Covid.

PART C – GUIDANCE AND POLICY DURING THE SPECIFIED PERIOD

Consultation between IfATE and the Government (whether the Department for Education or other government agencies or bodies) about the potential impact on young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education, prior to the announcement of a national lockdown on 23 March 2020

74. We kept the DfE informed about our progress through the pandemic. We were not consulted about a national lockdown.

The challenges employers and educational establishments faced in

implementing the national lockdown on 23 March 2020 with regard to the provision or continuation of apprenticeships and technical education, in particular with respect to:

a. **Young people's learning and training**
b. **Young people's wellbeing and mental health**
c. **The financial implications for young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education**

75. An apprentice's experience in lockdown was largely dictated by the way in which the employer was impacted. This could be very varied; some business sectors were, in effect, closed down, and those apprentices would have been furloughed or possibly faced redundancy, others worked remotely, still others carried on in person, albeit with measures in place to try to control infection.

76. To mitigate some of this impact, the DfE altered its funding rules to make pausing apprenticeships easier and to extend the time from gateway to completion.

77. The DfE also published guidance with information about support for apprentices who had been made redundant or were at risk of redundancy.

78. As set out earlier, IfATE's apprenticeship assessment flexibilities aimed to overcome some of the specific challenges faced in relation to assessment. We know, from our own engagement with stakeholders, that these flexibilities made a positive difference and ultimately benefitted apprentices by helping to ensure they could complete their apprenticeships in a timely way without compromising standards. Employers, training providers and EPAOs would be best placed to provide detailed information about their experience during this period, however, insight **(exhibit CG/21 - INQ000646107)** from our discussions with them highlighted the following:

- Challenges for EPAOs around accessing apprentices/bookings from training providers

- Concerns about apprentices' ability to generate appropriate evidence to support assessment and/or risk that evidence would be out of date due to delays
- Impact on EPA readiness where apprentice job roles had changed due to Covid
- Lost learning/skills drift and the impact of this on apprentices' ability to complete their apprenticeship
- Sector capacity to meet any surge in demand as apprentices returned from breaks in learning

79. Some sectors were disproportionately impacted by lockdown, such as hospitality, retail, construction and hair and beauty. These variations are reflected in feedback gathered from IfATE's employer route panels. I exhibit a copy of an email summarising this feedback as my exhibit **(CG/25 - INQ000646120)**.

80. As far as IfATE is aware, Covid had no specific impact on preparing for T levels over and above its impact on school and college students generally. Anecdotally, some providers told us they had chosen to delay plans to adopt T levels given the additional work and disruption generated by responding to Covid-19 in relation to their existing qualification offer. Other organisations and the DfE will be better placed to provide information about that.

cConsultation between Government and the providers of apprenticeships and technical education in the setting of guidance

81. This is a question for the Government or for providers.

82. So far as IfATE's own work was concerned, we continued to work closely with employers and their representatives, which helped us to understand what was happening in particular sectors and occupations. As detailed above, we also worked closely with providers, EPAOs and employer groups to develop suitable discretions for some apprenticeship standards so that apprentices could complete their assessments in a safe manner.

The extent to which providers of apprenticeships and technical education set their own policies (in light of such guidance) in respect of:

i. **The provision of face-to-face teaching or training to young people**
ii. **The provision of teaching or training online to young people**
iii. **The closure of facilities to young people**
iv. **The provision of support for young people's access to online learning**
v. **Young people's in-person attendance at workplaces or educational establishments**

83. Our EPA flexibilities were available but not mandatory, and EPAOs had discretion to apply the changes or continue with assessment as originally planned. EPAOs could also opt to pause an assessment whenever they, the employer and/or the apprentice felt that was most appropriate. We know from the EPAOs we consulted that they remained fully engaged in EPA delivery (with no staff being furloughed) and felt increasingly prepared for successive lockdowns as the pandemic progressed.

84. The key guidance likely to have impacted apprentices would have been whatever rules were in place that affected their workplace or industry, as well as any guidance offered by training providers responsible for off-the-job elements of their apprenticeship training.

85. We issued no directions to T level providers. Like other 16–18-year-old students in schools and colleges, T level students were subject to the same guidance from DfE about the conduct of teaching and learning activities.

Consultationwith IfATE in the setting of policy and/or implementation of government guidance

86. So far as general policy or guidance relating to the pandemic is concerned, there was no consultation with IfATE. We were in regular discussions with DfE concerning the adjustments to our own work, what would be continued or paused and so on, and were usually sighted on DfE decisions as they related

to our role. We also acted as a conduit for information on emerging DfE policies, guidance and support, sharing this with employers and providers through our various stakeholder communication channels.

87. Alongside delivery of and support for response measures already referenced, we fed into DfE and central government thinking on recovery. I attach, by way of example, papers showing the sorts of issues we were considering and that were shared with the DfE in 2020. I exhibit a paper on Stimulating recovery through the apprenticeship and technical education system as my exhibit **(CG/26 - INQ000646111)**, and a presentation on imperatives for recovery as my exhibit **(CG/27 - INQ000646112).**

88. My impression is that ESFA was more closely involved in the setting of policy during this period, which may not be particularly surprising, as our role was largely focused on setting standards and assessment, not on the funding or provision of education or training.

89. DfE consulted IfATE on T level grading and Ofqual consulted IfATE with regards to technical education guidance. I exhibit this guidance as my exhibit **(CG/28 - INQ000646113)**.

Consultation with young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education (or their representatives) in the setting of policy and/or implementation of government guidance.

90. We may not be the correct organisation to ask, as we do not set policy, and were not subject to significant government guidance (our EPA flexibilities, for example, were self-generated).

91. Our communication was via employers, training providers and EPAOs who then communicated with their own apprentices and learners. Although we did seek insight and views from IfATE's Apprentice Panel to help inform our work, we did not have direct channels of communication with young people either

during the pandemic or before or after (they were not, for example, registered with us).

Communication of policies to young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education, for example, in respect of:

a. **The provision of face-to-face teaching and training**
b. **The provision of teaching and training online**
c. **The provision of support for young people's access to online learning**
d. **Young people's in-person attendance at workplaces and/or educational establishments**

92. Young people could see any changes to policy or processes set out on IfATE's website. Generally, communication was through training and EPA providers and employers. We would communicate directly with providers and employers and put material on our website for them to access. They would then determine what to communicate to young people. Similarly, with T level students, our communication would have been via T level providers and the DfE. There was also some communication via the sector trade press (for example, FE Week) and IfATE's social media channels.

Whether apprenticeships and technical education continued throughout the Specified Period, including any periods when they were paused, and an explanation of the reason for any changes to the provision of apprenticeships and technical education, for example, greater use of online learning

93. Apprenticeships continued in general, subject to the impact of the pandemic on the sector in which the apprentice worked. In some sectors training was paused (for example if the workforce was furloughed). Otherwise, it would have continued, albeit possibly reflecting the changes made in the workplace as a result of the pandemic. I exhibit data generated during the early days of the pandemic as my exhibit **(CG/29 - INQ000646114); (CG/29a - INQ000646115) (CG29b - INQ000646116); (CG29c - INQ000646117)**; it is

important to remember that the picture changed rapidly once lockdowns were lifted.

94. EPA flexibilities were the main adjustment made by IfATE but these related to assessment rather than training provision. Assessment numbers reduced during lockdowns but had recovered and exceeded pre-Covid levels by the end of the pandemic.

95. T levels started in September 2020 as planned and continued as planned throughout the Specified Period and beyond. There was a greater use of online learning than would otherwise have been the case, to reflect lockdowns, as with school and college-based learning generally.

Impact of these changes on young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education during the Specified Period, including whether any of these impacts disproportionately impacted specific geographical areas and/or groups of young people (for example young people from disadvantaged backgrounds)

96. We have no specific evidence on impact, and other organisations will be better placed to assist the Inquiry on this question. It would be expected that apprentices in industries more directly affected by the pandemic would themselves have been more affected (for example, furloughed apprentices would have had their education delayed more than others, apprentices in healthcare settings would have been subject to the stresses of working in healthcare through the pandemic, and so on). T level students' experiences would not be expected to differ from students following other school or college-based education.

97. Some of our "business as usual" work was paused during the pandemic, particularly in the earlier months. So, for example, we paused work on revisions and reviews of standards on 9 April 2020. That work could have resulted in adjustments to standards or adjustments to the funding band for a standard. The consequence would be that, for a period, some learners continued to be assessed against older standards that we would have updated

in more normal circumstances. We have no reason to think that will have had a material effect on their education or training, or ability to pursue their chosen vocation, but it is possible there may have been some effect.

The impact (if any) of decisions made about grade calculation for final secondary school examinations on apprenticeship and technical education places

98. We do not have information on this.

99. There were discussions with Ofqual and DfE about adjusting the grades for the first T level cohort (started September 2020, finished August 2022), but these related to T levels being novel and challenging qualifications, rather than being directly linked to Covid. This is normal practice for the introduction of any new national qualification and was expected to have happened in any case as benchmarking a small cohort in a new qualification would always be difficult. However, we were keen to see that the T level cohort was not disadvantaged when compared to other cohorts and so indirectly there may have been a connection to grade calculations for other qualifications.

PART D – ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

IfATE's assessment of the impact of the pandemic on young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education, in terms of:

a. **Their learning and training**
b. **Their future career and employment prospects**
c. **The numbers of young people completing their apprenticeships or courses**
d. **The numbers of young people enrolling for undertaking apprenticeships and technical education**
e. **The extent to which there has been a differential impact as between different groups of young people (according for example to levels of disadvantage)?**

100. Student number data are given above. We believe others will have captured learner outcome data. I understand that the DfE holds the core data sets that could provide further information on this question.

101. The move to online learning was challenging in some occupations and sectors, but, again, we do not think it was uniquely challenging for these qualifications when compared to others (save that for apprenticeships there is some learning that can only be done in the workplace).

102. The T level rollout continued as planned. Internal targets for rollout were missed but it is unclear whether the pandemic was the reason. It is possible that Covid dampened the marketing and communication for T levels and reduced the pace of the rollout and potentially impacted on employer awareness of T levels (and thus employability of T level students), but we have no data to address this question.

Q15. What (if any) support was provided by the Government in order to mitigate any detrimental impact of the pandemic response on young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education

103. Paragraphs 77 and 78 describe DfE interventions aimed at making it easier to pause apprenticeships as well as providing support for apprentices at risk of redundancy. Government would be better placed to advise on these and other interventions and the impact they had during this period.

Q16. What (if any) measures were adopted by providers of apprenticeships and technical education to try to mitigate any detrimental impact, and how effective have those measures been

104. Again, the main measures we are aware of are the flexibilities we introduced in relation to apprenticeship assessments. We consider these to have been effective as delivery of assessments continued throughout lockdown in many sectors and EPAOs wished to retain these flexibilities post-lockdown.

PART E – YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES

Whether there were any means by which IfATE was able to ascertain the views of young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education as to the impact of the pandemic response upon their training during the Specified Period, and whether IfATE played any role in obtaining these views and communicating them to the relevant government or industry decision-makers

105. As explained above, we do not have a direct relationship with learners. However, our Apprentice Panel was in operation through the pandemic and provided insight that helped IfATE to understand the impact of Covid on the apprentice community. Those insights played a direct role in informing guidance produced by the panel itself to support employers and training providers in delivering high-quality apprenticeship experiences.

PART F – LESSONS LEARNED

IfATE's assessment of any enduring impact of the pandemic on young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education during the pandemic, including a summary of the conclusions of any research or data relied upon (and exhibit any key material)

106. The impact on student numbers is set out above, as is the finding that the flexibilities introduced in assessments had enduring value in their own right. It is possible the pandemic impacted the roll out of T levels, but we have no data to analyse this.

WhatIfATE considers ought to be done now to mitigate those enduring negative impacts of the pandemic on young people

107. This is a policy matter for the Government.

What IfATE considers ought to be done differently in the event of a future pandemic or other civil emergency to better protect the interests of young people

undertaking apprenticeships and technical education and what IfATE considers to have been the key lessons to learn from the pandemic about the interests of young people undertaking apprenticeships and technical education

108. In July 2020, IfATE provided evidence to the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships that included points that are still relevant today to lessons learned from the pandemic. I exhibit this written evidence as my exhibit **(CG/30 - INQ000646118).**

109. It may be helpful for there to be an evaluation of the cause/impact on T level student numbers resulting, for example, from issues such as lack of awareness of T levels, mentioned above.

110. It will certainly be helpful to remember that workplaces are not just places where people are employed, or that deliver goods and services for the economy, but are also often places of education. Whether that perspective would or should have driven different decisions on, say, whether to lockdown, what to lockdown, and for how long, is not for IfATE to say. However, the fact that measures that have an employment cost also have a training cost should be considered, for example in any future pre-pandemic planning.

111. Uncertainty about the length of lockdowns made planning more difficult.

112. In designing new qualifications, awards, and delivery of education, resilience in the face of a global pandemic should be considered as should the way in which delivery and assessment will be managed in any future lockdown to mitigate impact on standards, apprentices and students.

113. The flexibilities extended by IfATE to all apprenticeships during lockdown have already accelerated positive changes to the way apprenticeship assessment is delivered. Further priorities for change and improvement, building on the lessons of Covid-19, are highlighted in the Secretary of State for Education's strategic guidance to IfATE in 2021 **(CG/04 - INQ000646086)**, notably paragraphs 2.4, 3.2 and 3.4.

114. In conclusion, the ability to pivot quickly to sustain training and education services for young people in the face of unprecedented events such as a pandemic is vital to combating the risks and long-term impacts of lost learning for future generations. For IfATE, that meant being open to collaborating, listening and learning, moving at pace to streamline and flex processes to unblock barriers to progress, and providing clear, timely and honest communication. Our abiding focus during the Covid pandemic was to give all learners the best possible chance to come through these significant challenges safely and successfully.

Statement of truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed: _ Personal Data

C J Grant

Dated: 28 July 2025