



Recruitment

# How Chesterfield College overcame FE recruitment challenges



Customer Story



Located in Chesterfield, Derbyshire, Chesterfield College is a further and higher education institution dedicated to inspiring futures and changing lives. Like many colleges in the FE sector, it has faced growing challenges in recruitment and retention, driven by years of pay stagnation, rising staff turnover, and fierce competition for specialist talent. In response to these challenges, the college partnered with IRIS Recruitment Services to modernise its recruitment processes, reduce reliance on recruitment agencies, and improve staff retention – with impressive results.

## Highlights

- From a paper-based system to a full digital recruitment process
- 180 roles recruited each year through IRIS Recruitment Services
- Significant savings and reduced reliance on agencies





## Modernising recruitment at Chesterfield College

Craig Acaster joined Chesterfield College in 2007 and began to work in HR and Recruitment. Over the years, he has taken on multiple roles and now serves as Head of HR and Assistant Principal for People and Culture. When he first started, applications were entirely paper based. The move to a digital system was initiated by Craig's predecessor, who introduced IRIS Recruitment Services as the college's first experience with online recruitment.

Today, Chesterfield College uses IRIS Recruitment Services for both their Applicant Tracking System (ATS) and recruitment campaigns. This includes key modules that support the entire recruitment process – from vacancy authorisation through to onboarding, along with integrations like job board posting and Experian Right to Work checks. ***“The change in efficiencies and time savings was immediate, and for applicants, it was a much-improved experience too. It was a game-changer going from paper to digital, and we made a lot of improvements initially,”*** says Craig.

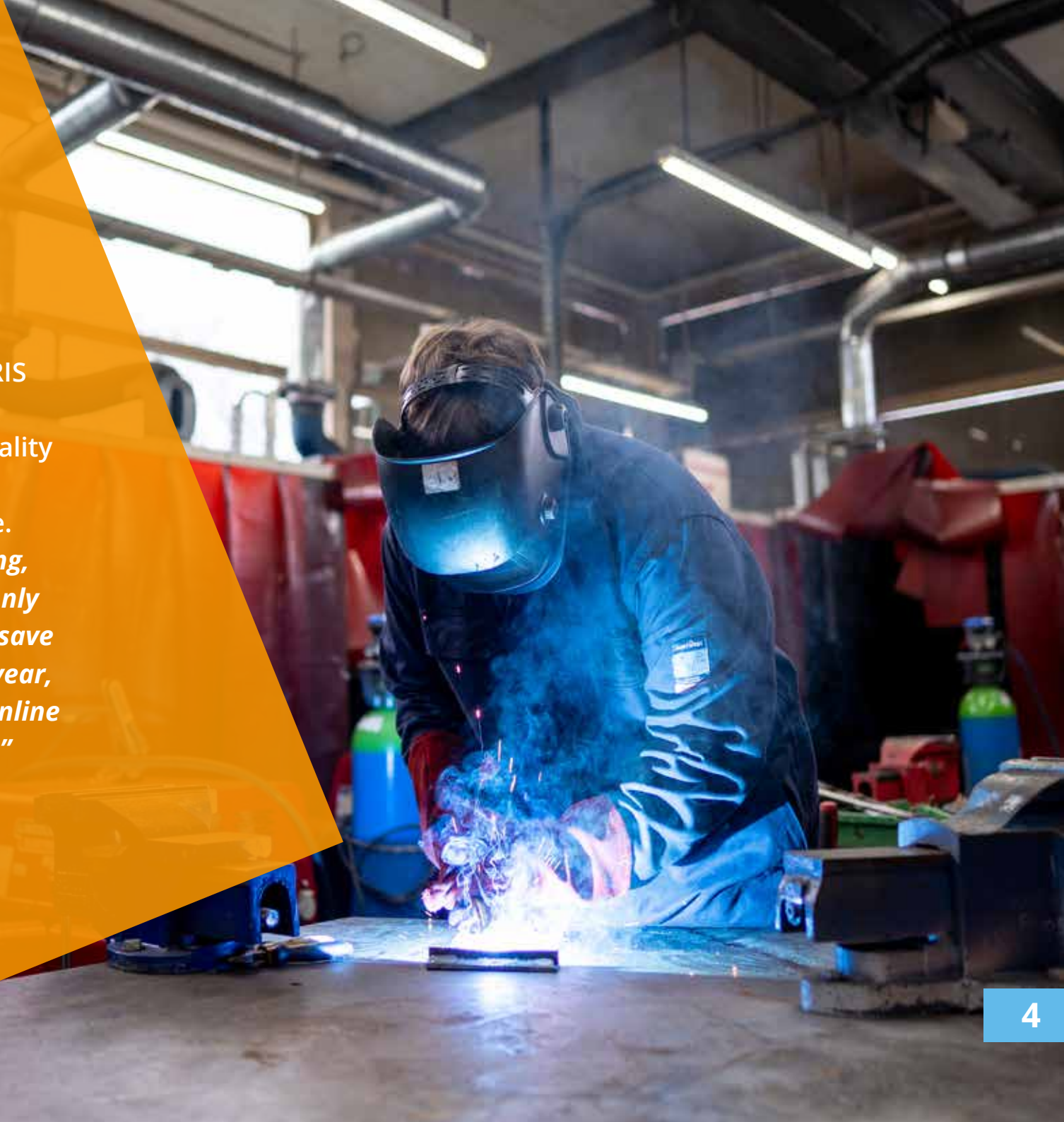


Craig Acaster, Head of HR & Assistant Principal for People and Culture



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On average, the college recruits around 180 roles per year using IRIS Recruitment Services. Over time, they've continued to add functionality to further optimise processes and improve the candidate experience. *“The technology is always improving, and there are still features we're only just starting to explore that could save us even more time. Over the next year, we're hoping to move everything online through IRIS Recruitment Services.”*





## Challenges and prioritising retention from day one

Recruiting in further education (FE) presents its own unique challenges. For Chesterfield College, trade lecturing roles are particularly difficult to fill, as qualified individuals often earn more working in industry than in education. There's also a significant challenge in recruiting English and Maths lecturers. ***"There's a 18% pay gap between what college teachers earn compared to schools. That makes it tough to attract the right talent,"*** notes Craig.

Over the past five to six years, recruitment has been particularly challenging due to stagnant pay in FE, especially when compared to the consistent annual pay increases offered in schools. ***"Recruitment has been really challenging. It's only recently, in the summer of 2023, that the Government fully funded a 6.5% pay offer, and last year the college self-funded a further 3%. Things are definitely starting to move in the right direction – and IRIS Recruitment Services has been crucial to getting us through this."***





A sector-wide study also revealed that FE teachers often leave their roles within the first three years of employment. Additionally, the number of applicants per role has significantly declined, from 12.5 applicants per vacancy in 2015/16 to just 4.4 in 2023/24. In response, the college made a strategic commitment to improving the staff experience from the very beginning of the employee journey. A key part of that strategy was investing in the IRIS Recruitment Services onboarding module. *“We wanted to make sure those first few weeks are as smooth and positive as possible,”* explains Craig. *“Giving new staff a good experience early on makes a big difference in helping them feel supported and want to stay.”*





## Choosing the right partner for the future

Recognising the importance of having the best possible recruitment system in place, Chesterfield College recently went through a comprehensive tender process to review all available solutions on the market. Despite being long-time users of IRIS Recruitment Services, they approached the process with an open mind. ***“I went into it completely open-minded, and I did tell the team that if we found a better system to support us, we would switch,”*** says Craig. ***“Recruitment has been such a challenge, and although we’ve been happy with IRIS Recruitment Services, we have to show our senior management team that we’re ensuring we’re using the best software to support our own objectives. We looked at everything on the market extensively, but we were really impressed with the presentation and the team at IRIS Recruitment Services and really pleased to see that they are still the best solution in the market. It was an easy decision.”***

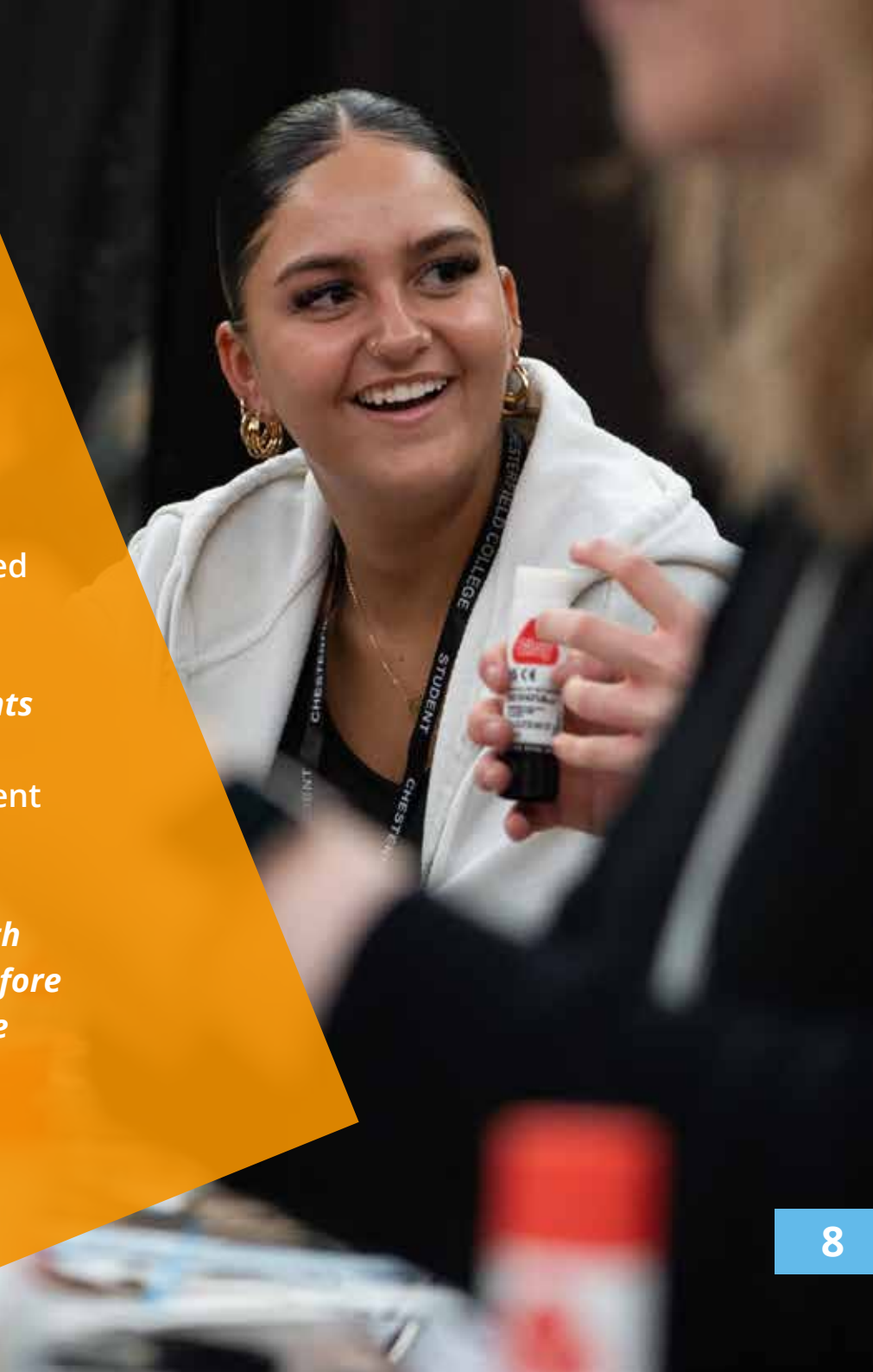
The review reaffirmed IRIS Recruitment Services as the right fit for the college, not just because of its capabilities but also for its ease of use and widespread adoption across teams. ***“The system is easy to use and intuitive – our central team and managers really like it, and their easy access to it makes life a lot easier for us.”***





## Driving results with onboarding and recruitment campaigns

As part of their ongoing evolution, the college has also adopted additional features such as onboarding and recruitment campaigns, which are already delivering value. *“Although it’s early days, we can already see an improvement in the applicants we’re receiving and how quickly they’re coming through.”* One major benefit has been the reduction in reliance on recruitment agencies, resulting in significant cost savings. *“They’re very expensive – some agencies charge up to 30% ‘finder’s fees’, so being able to work with them less has been a definite plus. With the recruitment campaigns, you only need to fill a few roles before it’s paid for itself, especially for positions that might have gone unfilled for months,”* shares Craig.





Looking back at the journey and forward to what's next, Craig is confident in his recommendation. ***"I would definitely recommend IRIS Recruitment Services to other colleges. We've looked extensively at the market and truly believe it's the best product and team available. Recruitment and staffing are our number one risk within the college, above anything else, so it's crucial we get it right – and IRIS Recruitment Services has been a key part of making that happen."***



To find out more about IRIS Recruitment Services, visit [www.iris.co.uk/products/iris-recruitment-services/](http://www.iris.co.uk/products/iris-recruitment-services/)



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