Leading skills: Exploring leadership in Further Education colleges – Paper 1

The future of Further Education and the backgrounds of college leaders

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Acknowledgements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on general further education colleges in England and their principals and seeks to set out:

- Why Further Education and its leadership matter.
- How the socio-economic and delivery context for FE leaders is changing.
- Who leads FE colleges.

A second report will address *how* further education leaders can be supported and developed.

Why leadership of further education matters

The Further Education and Skills sector fulfils a twin economic and social mission by providing educational opportunities to young people, adults and employers within a diverse range of settings.

Central to success in these missions is effective leadership. There is a strong body of evidence showing that leadership matters to public service outcomes. Specifically, past research has shown that good leaders in FE drive improvements in teaching standards and student outcomes. Compared to studying in a college led by a low performing leader, a successful leader can improve the likelihood of a student achieving a Level 2 qualification by 15.9 percentage points and a Level 3 by 14.1 percentage points.

Over the fence, school leadership has received considerable attention from policymakers and politicians. Reforms have included efforts to: reduce bureaucracy, increase headteacher autonomy, recruit and develop top headteachers, bring headteachers in from outside the sector, professionalise school leadership, and establish a recognised path to school leadership. The list goes on.

However, there has been much less analysis of who college leaders are, what skills they need in a fast-changing environment and how we can develop the leaders for the future. This project seeks to fill this gap.

Why FE leadership matters *now*

Thinking about FE leadership is particularly important now:

- **Demographic challenge**: FE principals are ageing and a third are aged 55 and over.

- **Retention challenge:** A third of FE leaders (33%) said they were likely to leave FE in the next 12 months (DfE), although this proportion is lower among senior leaders with 76% saying that they are unlikely to leave FE in the next 12 months.

- **Growing concerns about the risks and pressures faced by FE Principals**: There have been some high-profile departures of principals from the sector over the last 12 months.

- The **delivery context for colleges is extremely challenging**. Eight in ten senior leaders (82%) cited funding / budget constraints as the main difficulty of working in FE.

- **Performance**: The large majority of colleges are considered to be performing well, with 76% of GFE colleges rated good or outstanding in 2017-18. The FE Commissioner entered eight colleges into formal intervention in the year 2017-18, taking the total to 27 in formal intervention as of 31 July 2018.

- **Socio-economic in a post-Brexit world**: The pressures on the sector are growing and the roles of colleges are evolving fast; and the socio-economic landscape is set to change again in post-Brexit Britain putting new demands on the sector. There is a risk that important institutions will fail and disappear.

What a changing socio-economic and delivery context means for colleges

Further Education and skills in post-Brexit Britain

Further education colleges provide skills to 2.2 million adults and 16-18 year-olds. Compared to those on the skill level below, undertaking training through further education boosts employment and wages, raising pay by 11% for those who achieve Level 2 and 9% for those who achieve Level 3.

The FE sector should be considered as central to addressing economic and social challenges in post-Brexit Britain. As Part II shows, the sector has been the answer to different questions at different moments in history. These have forced colleges to adapt and brought in different waves of leaders and leadership approaches. Looking to the **socio-economic context of post-Brexit Britain**, we envisage an expanded and more fundamental role for the FE and skills sector.

Take, first, the post-Brexit economic landscape. As immigration falls, we will have to rely much more on developing homegrown talent among the lower skilled. Central to improving the UK's poor productivity is a much stronger core of technical skills (we currently languish 16th among OECD countries on technical skills). We stand little chance of addressing the huge regional economic imbalances without effective local colleges.

Second, further education must be recognised as a primary channel for social mobility. There is, here, a huge collective dishonesty in much media and political debate with its focus on access to a handful of the most celebrated universities. Of the 2.2 million adult learners participating in further education in 2017/18: 16% had a learning difficulty or disability, and 22% were from an ethnic minority background.[1] Looking at those aged 16 to 18 in 2010, three in five (58%) of pupils from poorer families attended a further education or sixth form college as opposed to four in ten (41%) among affluent pupils (in the least deprived quintile).[2]

The report also highlights the **changing delivery context for FE colleges**:

1. **Funding reductions** are putting pressures on colleges' finances. Spending per capita has been on a steep downward trajectory during the 2000s in FE colleges. The Augar Review is currently looking at all post-18 funding.

2. **Structural change** is leading to larger institutions on average through Area Reviews and mergers.

3. **Competitive forces in FE are taking hold in new areas, such as apprenticeships.** Providers increasingly must square the commercial reality with their on-going social mission to provide remedial learning – or a 'second chance' – to individuals failed by other education settings.

4. **Devolution,** for instance through the Adult Education Budget (around £1.5bn), offers opportunities for colleges to evolve as leaders in their local areas.

5. **New technologies** will alter how and where learning can take place – offering opportunities for colleges to reach new groups of learners who may have been marginalised or excluded in the past.

6. **Constant reforms** to funding, qualifications and structures have led to a complex and changeable system.

Adapting and responding to these complex and rapidly-changing challenges and opportunities is a core purpose of FE leadership.

Who college leaders are – experiences and backgrounds

Part III of this report explores the experiences and backgrounds of college principals. It reveals:

- The predominant progression route into the role of principal appears to be via teaching and leadership roles in FE. Around two thirds of principals have a background in education and training.

- An emerging divergence between the professional background of many leaders (teaching) and the commercial aspects of the emerging leadership role.

- Other – though less common – routes include progressing up the administrative functions in FE (such as finance); transferring from another public sector career; and entering senior management from a private sector business.

- A minority of leaders come directly from outside the sector. The colleges that such leaders oversee appear on average to be are larger.

- A much larger proportion of principals have some experience outside FE, though in many cases this is likely to have been earlier in their career.

- We observe a diverse sector. As in schools, where multi-academy trusts have stimulated the new role of 'Executive Heads' and 'Chief Executives', so in FE we see leaders managing multiple campuses and institutions.

- The range of competences required of FE leaders has expanded in the long-term and is diverse. It is becoming increasingly difficult for leaders to be skilled across the full range of college functions.

- Our analysis reveals that further education leaders are diverse by background. Women and ethnic minorities are better represented in FE leadership than in university leadership. However, while 9% of principals come from a Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic background (BAME),[3] 18% of students are from BAME backgrounds.[4]

Wider reform is needed to enable FE leaders to succeed

The next phase of the research will look at how college leaders can be developed.

While this project focuses on leaders themselves, we are not arguing that better leadership alone is likely to resolve all the challenges in further education. We note that many of the symptoms of problems in FE – such as the large proportion of colleges that are currently in deficit – are likely to be influenced by policy decisions as well as leadership performance. Experts have raised concerns that successive and repeated policy reforms have undermined the mission of FE.[5] Politicians and policymakers need to create an environment in which successful leadership can thrive and make a difference.

PART I: PROJECT FOCUS AND WHY LEADERSHIP IN FE MATTERS

Project purpose

There has been much attention focussed on executive leadership of both schools and universities in recent times. In contrast, the further education sector has received far less attention, and for a long time has carried the moniker, the 'forgotten sector'. This project seeks to help redress this balance.

The further education and skills sector

The further education sector provides educational opportunities to young people, adults and employers within a diverse range of educational institutions. Training ranges from entry-level maths and English, to academic, professional and technical qualifications, through to work-based learning.

A 2015 study published by the Government, showed that undertaking further education training and achieving qualifications is associated with substantial wages premiums. Compared to those on the skill level below, undertaking training through further education boosts employment and wages, raising pay by 11% for those who achieve Level 2 and 9% for those who achieve Level 3.[6] Qualifications at levels 2 and 3 also contribute to higher probability of being employed.

The largest share of the FE and skills sector is made up of General Further Education Colleges, which between them educate and train 2.2 million adults and young people.[7] This accounts for 54% of FE students overall.[8] As of August 2018, of the 266 colleges, 179 are General Further Education Colleges with the rest mainly made up of smaller sixth form colleges.[9]

Looking at the wider FE sector, it is clear why it should be considered fundamental to any broad-based approach to social mobility. Although media and political attention often focusses on access to Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities, students from more disadvantaged backgrounds dominate further education. Of the 2.2 million adult learners participating in further education in 2017/18: 16% had a learning difficulty or disability, and 22% were from an ethnic minority background.[10] Looking at those aged 16 to 18 in 2010, three in five (58%) of pupils from poorer families attended a further education or sixth form college as opposed to four in ten (41%) among affluent pupils (in the least deprived quintile).[11]

Meanwhile, Figure 1 sets out how FE learners are much more likely to come from more deprived areas – this being true across all age groups.

Figure 1: Total FE & Skills participation by deprivation background of learners (2017-18)
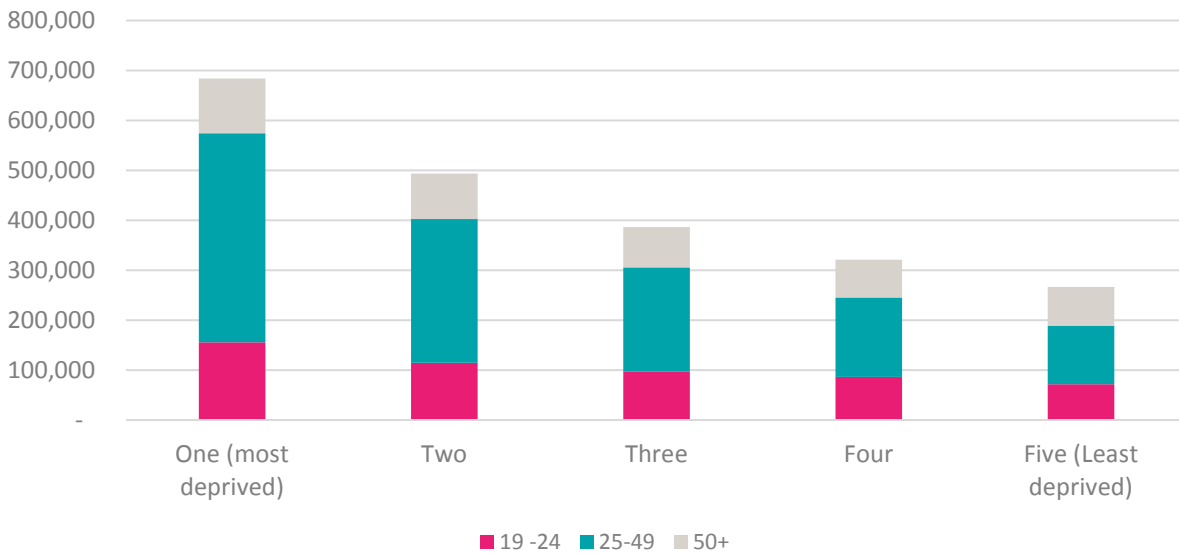
Source: DFE, Deprivation tables for Further Education and Skills: December 2018, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/fe-data-library

Even when focusing in on Level 4 and above (diplomas, foundation degrees and degree-level qualifications), the proportion of learners from deprived areas still outweighs those from more affluent areas.

Figure 2: FE and Skills participation at Level 4 and above by deprivation background of learners (2017-18)
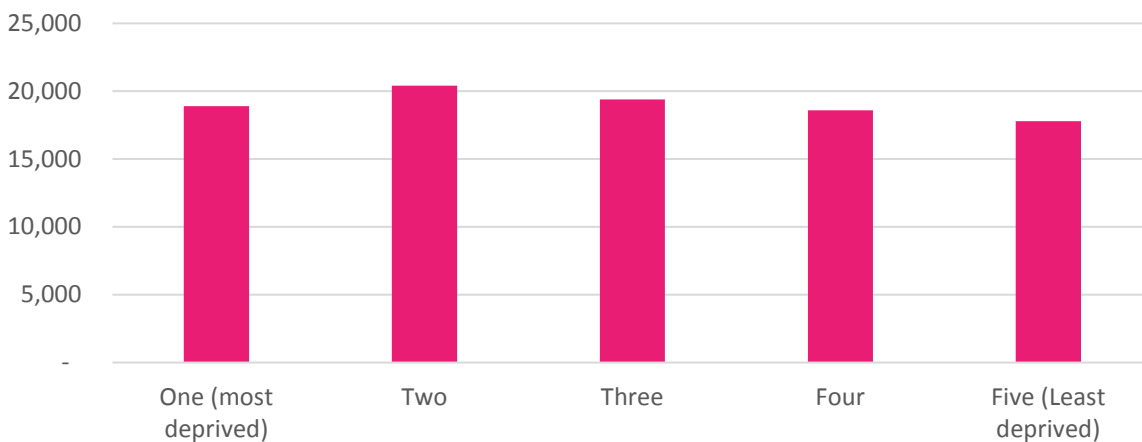
Source: DFE, Deprivation tables for Further Education and Skills: December 2018, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/fe-data-library

FE leaders and why they matter

A recent review by the Behavioural Insights Team found strong evidence that effective public services leaders are associated with improved organisation performance, productivity and employee well-being.[12] There is also a rich evidence base showing that effective leadership has a significant impact on improvement and pupil outcomes in the school sector.[13]

In colleges, leaders must provide a strategic vision, manage college finances, ensure a reputation for quality teaching and learning remains high, run a large people-centred business and deliver clear accountability. Beyond this, they must lead institutions that have important

roles as community leaders and partners. Recent research by the Centre for Vocational Education Research (CVER) at the London School of Economics has provided empirical evidence that FE college principals make a difference to students' educational outcomes and that principals differ in their ability to facilitate student progress.[14] The CVER analysis followed principals over time as they led different colleges and found that principals differ markedly in their ability to enable students to progress educationally. Switching from a principal who is at the bottom 25th percentile to a principal who is in the top 75th percentile increases students' probability to achieve a Level 2 qualification by 15.9 percentage points, to achieve a Level 3 by 14.1 percentage points and to enrol in Level 4 or above qualification by 3.7 percentage points.

Figure 3: Likelihood of student achieving or enrolling by performance of college principal
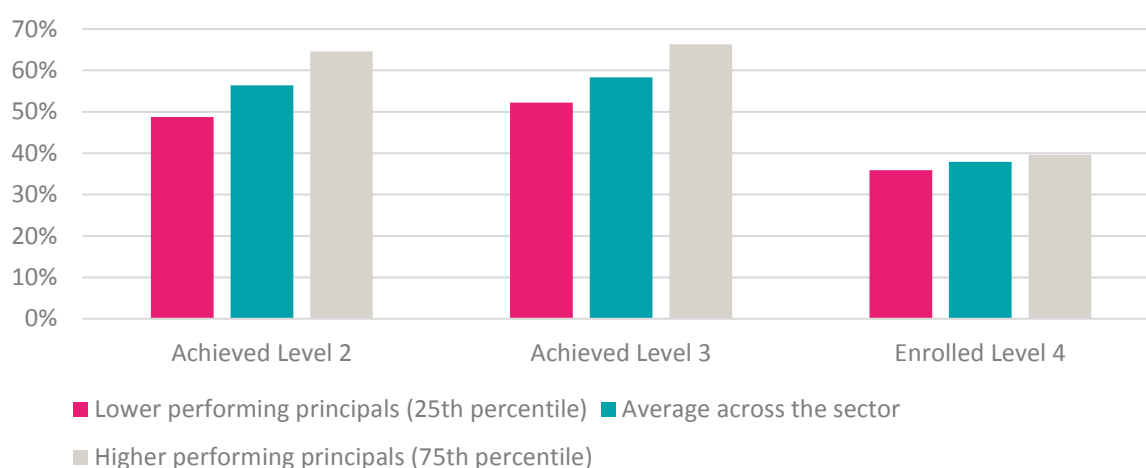
Source: CVER, Effectiveness of CEOs in the Public Sector: Evidence from Further Education Institutions *(2017)*

Currently, the large majority of colleges are rated as performing well: in 2017-18, three quarters (76%) of GFE colleges were ranked as good or outstanding.[15] However, the FE Commissioner entered eight colleges into formal intervention in the year 2017-18, taking the total to 27 in formal intervention as of 31 July 2018.[16]

This project

This report investigates executive leaders in General Further Education (GFE) Colleges and seeks to provide a clearer picture of who they are, what they do, and how policy can help them be most effective in challenging times.

In focusing on the leaders of the 179 General Further Education (GFE) colleges in England, we acknowledge the importance of other parts of the sector, such as independent training providers, land-based colleges, other specialist colleges and sixth form colleges. However, we note that these institutions face different pressures and opportunities, and their leaders may need quite different experiences and skills.

The title of the most senior executive of a GFE college is usually one of 'Principal', 'Executive Director', or a combination of the two. This person is accountable to the Board of Governors and holds the position of Accounting Officer. For simplicity we use the title 'Principal' throughout this report. When we use alternative terms such as 'chief executive' we do so intentionally.

Research questions:

- What is the changing socio-economic and delivery context for FE colleges and their leaders?
- Who are FE college leaders, how do they get there, and what are their skills and experiences?
- How can the FE sector get the leadership skills and capabilities that it needs?

This report answers the first two questions, leaving the question of 'how' to a second report.

Research methods

Our analysis draws on the following methods:

- A review of literature and existing evidence on further education policy and practice, public sector and education leadership.

- Research of the online profiles of principals at general further education colleges to identify their work experiences and routes to leadership.

- Analysis of Ofsted ratings, financial turnover, and the composition of revenues for each college.

- Interviews with principals of 14 GFE colleges with coverage across each of the four routes described in Part III.

- Two roundtable discussions with college principals, experts, civil servants, businesses and leadership experts.

PART II: THE FUTURE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLICY CONTEXT FOR FURTHER EDUCATION AND ITS LEADERS

This section describes the changing socio-economic and policy context in which the further education sector and its leaders operate.

How Further Education has evolved and is evolving

Looking back: How FE has evolved

In this section we describe how the further education and skills sector has been the answer to different questions at different moments in history.

- **1940s** Wartime and post-war Britain saw growing interest in domestic social and economic concerns, including recognition in the 1943 white paper, *Educational Reconstruction*, that many school-leavers had no education after the age of 14. Local education authorities were given powers to mandate attendance at college for the under-18s (albeit for short periods of time).[17]

- In the **1950s**, technical education was prioritised, and technical colleges expanded. In occupations such as manufacturing, engineering and construction apprenticeships were a principal route into a job and government intervention was limited. Government sought to expand 'colleges of advanced technology'.[18]

- The **1960s** saw the emergence of Industrial Training Boards and skills policy that was driven by both employers and unions.[19] In its 1966 White Paper, *A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges*, the Labour Government sought to establish regional polytechnics to form a nation-wide network for technical education and to enable provision of higher education through further education institutions.[20]

- The **1970s** saw further consideration of how higher education could be delivered through FE as well as the setting up of the Manpower Services Commission. There was a significant reduction in apprenticeships in manufacturing and many further education colleges diversified into other areas.[21]

- The **1980s** witnessed challenges in the youth labour market and the expansion of post-16 educational participation. Colleges were increasingly taking on a 'social inclusion' role.[22]

- **1990s** Britain saw the incorporation of colleges. This 1992 reform made colleges independent from local authority control, with the intention that they would become more responsive to the needs of local businesses. This move to markets also involved the conversion of polytechnics into 'autonomous' universities.[23]

- In the **2000s**, the government policies focused on large programmes to expand the supply of skills in the belief that employers were underinvesting. However, some of these schemes delivered low-value training.

- The **2010s** has increasingly seen further education become part of a skills system aimed at meeting the needs of UK businesses. The period has also been characterised by significant funding reductions and policy reform.

The historic evolution of FE is charted in more detail in Table 1, which describes the wider economic conditions as well as major reforms experienced each decade.

Table 1: Outline of economic and education policy contexts by decade[24]

	The economy	FE and Skills	Education in Whitehall	Secretaries of State
1950s: Out of War	Average annual GDP Growth: **2.6%** Average annual unemployment: **1.7%**	Technical education prioritised Introduction of General Certificates of Education (GCEs) at 'O' and 'A' level The White Paper on "Technical Education"(1956)	Ministry of Education, 1944–1964	**Minister of Education** George Tomlinson Florence Horsbrugh David Eccles The Viscount Hailsham Geoffrey Lloyd David Eccles
1960s: Technicolour Britain	Average annual GDP Growth: **2.8%** Average annual unemployment: **2%**	The White Paper on 'Better Opportunities in Technical Education' (1961) New General Courses (G Courses) to run alongside Technical courses (T Courses) "Industrial Training Act" (1964) creates Industrial Training Boards (ITBs)	Ministry of Education, Department of Education and Science, 1964–1992	Sir Edward Boyle **Secretary of State for Education and Science** Quintin Hogg (Formerly Viscount Hailsham Michael Stewart Anthony Crosland Patrick Gordon Walker Edward Short
1970s: Stagnation and Strife	Average annual GDP Growth: **1.9%** Average annual unemployment: **4.4%** Recession: 1974–75	Expansion Framework (1972) Manpower Services Commission set up Training ROSLA to 16	Department of Education and Science	Margaret Thatcher Reginald Prentice Fred Mulley Shirley Williams Mark Carlisle
1980s: Upheaval	Average annual GDP Growth: **2.6%** Average annual unemployment: **10.4%** Recession: 1980–81	"New Training Initiative" Reforms to GCE 'A' Levels The Academic Vocational Divide Creation of National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)	Department of Education and Science	Sir Keith Joseph Kenneth Baker John MacGregor
1990s: New Britannia	Average annual GDP Growth: **2.4%** Average annual unemployment: **9.7%**	Incorporation NVQs Dearing review of HE	Department of Education and Science	**Secretary of State for Education** Kenneth Clarke John Patten Gillian Shephard

	Recession: 1991	National traineeships	Department for Education, 1992–1995 Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1995–2001	**Secretary of State for Education and Employment** Gillian Shephard David Blunkett
2000s: Boom and Bust	Average annual GDP growth: **1.7%** Average annual unemployment: **5.4%** The "Great Recession": 2008-2009	Individual learner accounts Higher General and Vocational The Skills Pledge	Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2001–2007 Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2007–2010	**Secretary of State for Education and Skills** Estelle Morris Charles Clarke Ruth Kelly Alan Johnson **Secretary of State for Children Schools and Families** Ed Balls
2010s: Austerity and Brexit Britain	Average annual GDP growth: **1.9%** Average annual unemployment: **5.4%**	Apprenticeships Employer ownership of skills and 'employer-led skills' School leading age raised to 17 and to 18 T-Levels	Department for Education (DfE), 2010- Present	**Secretary of State for Education** Michael Gove Nicky Morgan Justine Greening Damien Hinds

Changing socio-economic context for FE in post-Brexit Britain

Looking to post-Brexit Britain, we envisage an expanded and more fundamental role for the FE and skills sector:

- **Greater focus on homegrown skills**. The UK has relied heavily on the skills of workers from the EEA in the past decade.[25] The Government has accepted the central premise of the advice from the Migration Advisory Committee: namely, that restrictions should be imposed on lower skilled migration.[26] This will mean that roles with salaries below £30,000 (apart from in exceptional occupations) will have to be sourced with UK talent, including low and mid-skilled occupations.[27] At the same time, the costs of using immigration labour are set to rise (e.g. through skills charges). These forces are likely to drive a greater reliance on home-grown skills, and especially on FE which is a core provider of learning opportunities for lower-skilled individuals.

- **Stronger and more even growth underpinned by high quality education.** Regional economic disparities have remained ingrained.[28] The Industrial Strategy pointed to 'entrenched regional disparities in education and skill levels' sitting at the heart of this.[29] High quality and accessible further education stands at the forefront of the quest for stronger growth in regional economies. Colleges are locally-based and can be responsive to local employers. Colleges may see new opportunities for influence through Local Industrial Strategies which are being developed by city regions.

- **A stronger core of technical skills to underpin the economy.** There is growing evidence that the UK's productivity gap is linked to a lack of technical skills training and that FE colleges can help to address this.[30] However, today, only 10 per cent of the British

workforce holds a certificate of technical education as their highest qualification. That puts Britain 16th out of 20 OECD countries.[31] Stronger technical skills are also at the centre of improving productivity in the UK economy which is woeful in comparison to other leading economies.

▪ **Social mobility**. The UK's referendum on the European Union revealed a divided nation, not just in attitudes to the EU, but also in terms of educational and employment opportunities. Political priorities have often focused on access to higher education, however FE is also a driver of social mobility, with high-quality education and training helping young people gain meaningful employment that lifts them out of poverty.[32] FE can attract and upskill parts of society that other providers of education are unable to reach and as such can help address the earnings disparity that exists between social groups.

Changing delivery context for FE

There are also wider emerging pressures and opportunities that derive from technology, globalisation and policy decisions. These mean that further education leadership is becoming increasingly complex and multi-faceted.

1. The financial context: Funding pressures

Funding cuts are raising questions about the financial viability of many institutions. As of summer 2018, there were 37 colleges with a published notice to improve their financial health, with reports that the number with financial warnings and need of assistance could rise to 100 (out of 269) in the future.[33] A very large proportion of colleges are running deficits. The Association of College's analysis of FE finances, using a method developed by the National Audit Office, found that 40% of colleges were in deficit in 2016-17.[34]

Funding cuts to the FE sector have been severe.[35] Funding and numbers have fallen dramatically in 19+ education, with the total number of learners falling from 4 million in 2005 to 2.2 million in 2016 and total funding falling by about 45% in real terms since 2009-10. Figure 4 shows spending per capita on a steep downward trajectory during the 2000s.

Figure 4: Spending per student in school sixth forms and further education colleges, actual and plans (2016–17 prices)
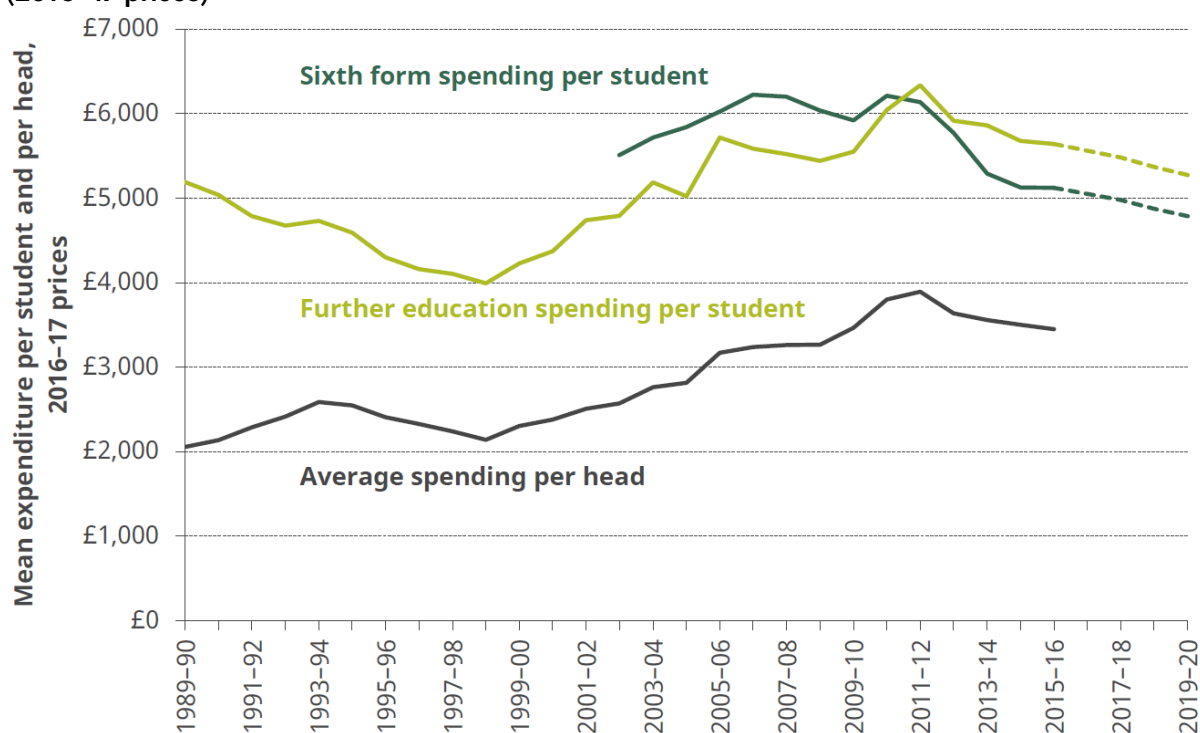
Source: Neil Amin Smith, David Phillips and Polly Simpson*, Long-run comparisons of spending per pupil across different stages of education* (IFS, 2018)

Margins are often very tight and many funding streams are volatile.[36] When we asked principals about the biggest challenge facing their college, the most common answer was funding cuts, with one principal describing funding reductions to their college of between 30-40% over the past five years. Other leaders were pessimistic about the financial viability of their organisation in the absence of more generous funding settlements. Inadequate funding has been accepted as a constraint by a wide range of commentators and officials.[37] For instance, in October 2018, Amanda Spielman, Ofsted Chief Inspector, advised the Public Accounts Committee that 'the real-term cuts to FES funding are affecting the sustainability and quality of FES provision'.[38] A survey of staff for the DfE found that senior college leaders were most likely to cite funding / budget constraints as the main difficulty of working in FE, with eight in ten (82%) citing this.[39]

Despite a pledge by the Conservative Government to end austerity, there is uncertainty as to whether funding for FE will rise in the next Spending Review. Given its focus on access and disadvantaged students, as well as technical education, it is possible that the Augar Review may rebalance funding towards FE.

2. The institutional context: College structures and mergers

In part because of the forces described above, but also due to a top-down efficiency drive, the structure of many FE colleges has been changing significantly. The number of colleges has fallen dramatically over the last 25 years. After incorporation in 1993 there were approximately 450, whereas now there are 266 colleges.[40] In 2017, in the aftermath of the Government's Area Reviews 29 mergers occurred, followed by 12 in 2018.[41] These mergers have had a profound effect on the nature and complexity of GFE colleges, and, as will be discussed later, in turn on the structure of leadership teams.

The Government hopes that these changes will create new revenue streams for the FE sector and industry relationships that will strengthen them in the long term, with the mergers designed to encourage efficiencies that will cushion the impact of funding cuts.[42]

3.   The delivery context: Competition

The UK FE sector is becoming increasingly competitive and operates in what has been described as a 'post-market' system, characterised by market forces and intervention.[43] As part of this shift, college revenues are coming from a range of competitive funding streams rather than funding per course. The IFS notes that 19+ apprenticeship spending now represents 36% of total adult education funding, compared with 13% in 2010.[44] The FE sector will need to work closely with employers and beat competition from other providers to win bids for apprenticeship training.

The supply side is increasingly competitive. Competitors to colleges include other training providers, employers, schools and universities. HE institutions have also increasingly offered courses that were the traditional remit of FE colleges, such as level 4 and level 5 Higher National Certificates and Diplomas and degree apprenticeships.[45] Schools too may seek to attract students who otherwise would attend FE.

The Government is also taking forward a new insolvency regime. Colleges will be treated like normal companies, although there will be special measures to protect existing students at insolvent colleges.[46]

Despite these commercial and competitive imperatives, colleges continue to fulfil a social mission: acting as providers of last resort to individuals who may be unattractive in purely commercial terms to other training providers; and, providing remedial learning – or a 'second chance' – to individuals failed by other education settings.[47] Colleges are therefore being asked to accomplish two goals that are increasingly in tension. On the one hand, employers will want colleges to attract learners who are the most able and engaged. On the other hand, their social mission draws colleges to seek out those are most disengaged from learning.[48] College principals that we spoke to believed that colleges retained an important social as well as economic mission, even if some felt that this was becoming increasingly difficult to pursue.

Meanwhile, colleges will also have to make the trade-offs between the best interests of learners and employers. For instance, employers are likely to want workers to be given job-specific skills. In contrast, learners want their skills to be transferrable and accredited.[49]

4.   The local context: greater devolution of policy decisions

Successive governments have argued in favour of devolving decision-making on further education spending to sub-regional and local government. From 2019-20, the Adult Education Budget (around £1.5bn) will be devolved to mayoral and combined authorities.[50] Local Enterprise Partnerships are also sources of capital investment. Skills Advisory Panels are being rolled out in each LEP areas as part of the Industrial Strategy. These Panels will analyse the current and future supply and demand for skills and help inform how skills requirements are met.[51]

From an optimistic perspective, devolution is an opportunity for colleges to act as leaders locally.[52] There may also be additional scope for colleges to collaborate locally to help shape joined-up skills provision available in the local economy.[53] In this context, it is important to note

that colleges will often have to operate in a context of strategic complexity where the outcomes they wish to achieve in their local area our only partly in their direct control and influence.

5. The delivery context: Technology and the learning offer

New technologies are altering how and where learning takes place. Increasingly, educational technology will see learners self-direct. Distance learning and virtual learning will undermine the hold that colleges have on their local population and open up competition. To remain competitive, colleges will have to change how they train learners. Recent research has registered concerns about the lack of engagement among FE sector leaders in technology and its potential to disrupt the market and skills provision.[54]

There is a further dilemma for colleges in that individually they lack the scale of a university to make investments in Edtech. At the same time, their curriculum offer is very diverse.

6. Perpetual flux and policy uncertainty

A recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies referred to the 'near-permanent state of revolution in the further education sector'. It charted 26 major reforms enacted since 2000, culminating in the intended introduction of T Levels in 2020. Reforms include the creation abolition of the Learning and Skills Council, Train to Gain and 14-19 diplomas. Recent changes include the new maths and English requirements for 16-18 year olds, the Apprenticeships Levy, and devolution of the Adult Education Budget.[55] The argument isn't whether each reform in and of itself is a good or bad policy, but rather the scale and continuous nature of change. The DfE survey finds that a third of senior leaders in colleges cite changes in government policy as one of the main difficulties of working in FE.[56]

The ability of leaders to respond to the changing environment is a crucial part of their effectiveness. A recent study for the DfE noted that 'high performing colleges principals and chief executives are highly skilled in using flexible forms of leadership and sensing and responding to the complex and changing contexts in which FE providers operate'.[57] Other research suggests that college leaders needs to be 'systems leaders' – i.e. capable of forming partnerships and having an influence beyond their direct control. This may be working with school leaders, helping shape local skills strategy and devising ways of reaching more vulnerable learner groups.[58]

Implications for FE leadership

While the socio-economic context means that there is potentially a central role for colleges, the delivery context is extremely challenging.

There is growing unease in some quarters at the pressures faced by college principals, following high profile departures of leaders in the recent past. In November 2018, David Hughes, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges argued that: 'We will struggle to create the culture, the environment and the institutions we want if the leadership roles are fraught with risk and potential vilification.'[59]

While two thirds of leaders (including middle managers, senior managers, principals and governors) reported that they were unlikely to leave FE in the next twelve months, one in eight (12%) said that they were very likely to leave and 1% had a job outside the FE sector, with a third

(33%) citing some likelihood of leaving the sector. The proportion of senior leaders who report that they are unlikely to leave the sector in the next 12 months is higher at 76%.

Future leadership roles and skills

As the SMF, the AELP, Ewart Keep and others have argued, it is possible to envisage multiple different scenarios for colleges in the future, but Figure 5 sets out some core aspects of leadership.

Figure 5: Skills for FE leadership
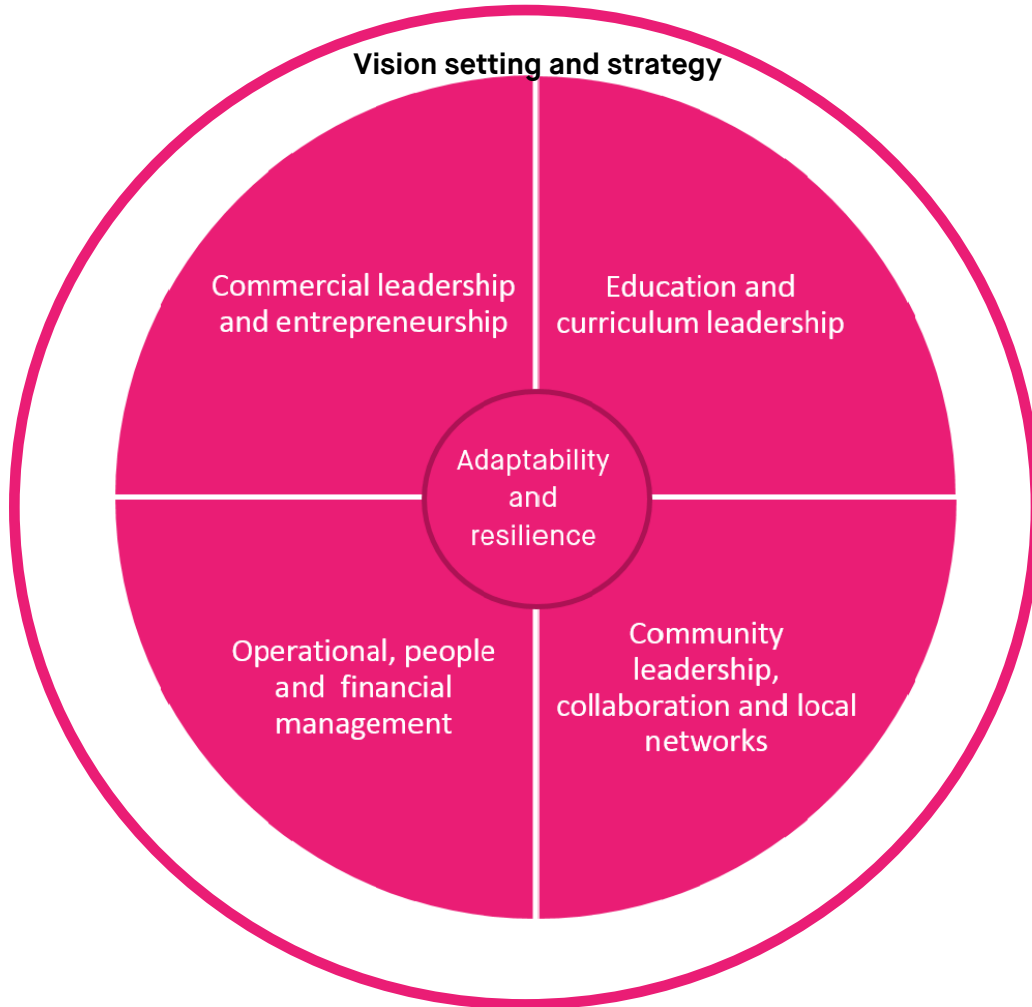
PART III: WHO ARE FURTHER EDUCATION LEADERS?

This section describes the skills, backgrounds and career paths of further education leaders and how they are changing, and the evolution of FE leadership roles.

1. What is a college leader and what is the structure of the organisation a principal leads?

Our research focusses on the most senior executives in FE colleges. The structure of FE colleges varies widely as does the structure of the leadership team. Mergers have led to greater variation in the structure of GFE colleges as well in the composition of the leadership team. Whatever the arrangement, the principal, or CEO, retains ultimate accountability.

A traditional structure is a stand-alone college on one site with a principal and a senior team covering operations, finance, external relations and curriculum. Some institutions seek to retain the autonomy of the original individual colleges by having a head of college and a chief executive overseeing the wider institution. An alternative structure is to have a chief executive with overall control and a separate head overseeing the pedagogical responsibilities or other functions.

Our research indicates that the size, structure and complexity of the college influences the nature of the principal role and the responsibilities the principal delegates to other members of the leadership team.

2. What are the demographic characteristics of college leaders?

This section describes the demographic characteristics of FE leaders.

Gender

Figure 6 shows the composition of college staff by gender. Slightly more than half are women, including in teaching positions and among senior managers. At the principal level, the proportion across gender is even. Compared to other education sectors, colleges have good representation of women among leaders. In secondary schools in 2016, 66% of teachers were female but just 38% of headteachers;[60] only three in ten (29%) of university vice-chancellors / principals are female.[61]

Figure 6: Gender composition of FE college staff
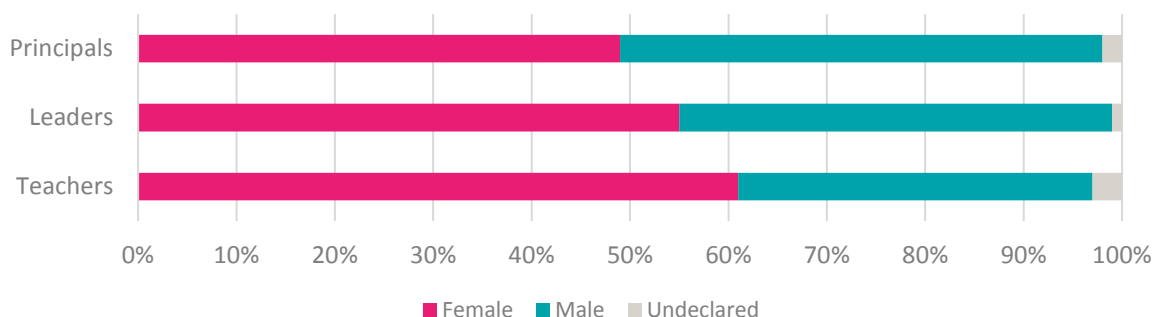

Source: DfE, College Staff survey 2018

Age

A third of Principals are aged 55 and over; half aged 45 to 54 and the remainder 44 or younger.[62] Along with many other parts of the public sector, there is a need to consider how to replace the significant share of leaders who are set to retire in the next five to ten years.

Ethnicity

Figure 7 shows that 9% of principals come from a Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic background (BAME).[63] This proportion is similar to that of headteachers in secondary schools.[64] The proportion is much higher than in higher education, where only 2% of vice-chancellors are from ethnic minority backgrounds (as of 2014-15).[65] However, the composition of FE leaders is very different from the student population at FE colleges where 18% of students are from BAME backgrounds.[66] Previous qualitative research has suggested that cultural and structural barriers may impede progression of ethnic minority staff.[67]

Figure 7: Proportion of FE student population and staff that are from ethnic minority
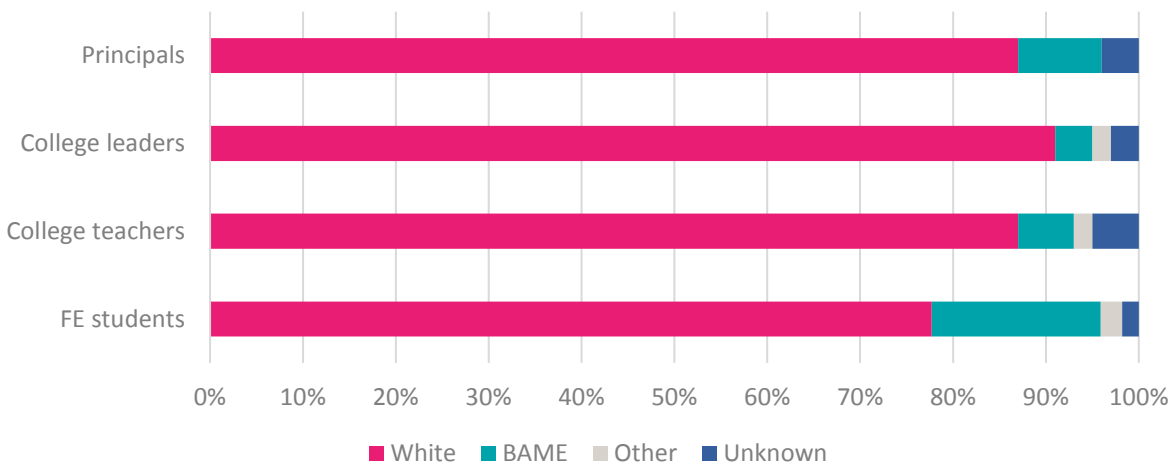
Source: DfE, CSS

## 3. Identifying the different pathways to leadership in FE

This section explores the career paths, skills and experiences of FE leaders. The routes we categorise are not exhaustive and are intended to convey the most common paths to leadership).

The four routes explored are:

1. **Teaching route** – those who rose up the teaching profession in colleges.

2. **Internal operational or commercial route** – those who developed their careers in the FE sector but in non-teaching disciplines.

3. **External leadership route** – those who were senior leaders in the private sector before transferring to colleges.

4. **Public sector route** – those who gained significant experience in the civil service, local government or military before moving into an FE leadership position.

The DfE's College Staff Survey finds that eight in ten (82%) of principals had external experience having worked in industry or outside of education at some point in the past. Nine in ten (88%) of those who had worked in industry had done so for at least three years and four in ten (41%) had done so for ten or more years. Figure 8 shows the industries in which principals are most likely to have had experience.

Figure 8: Experience by industry amongst principals with background in industry, % (responses with more than 5%)
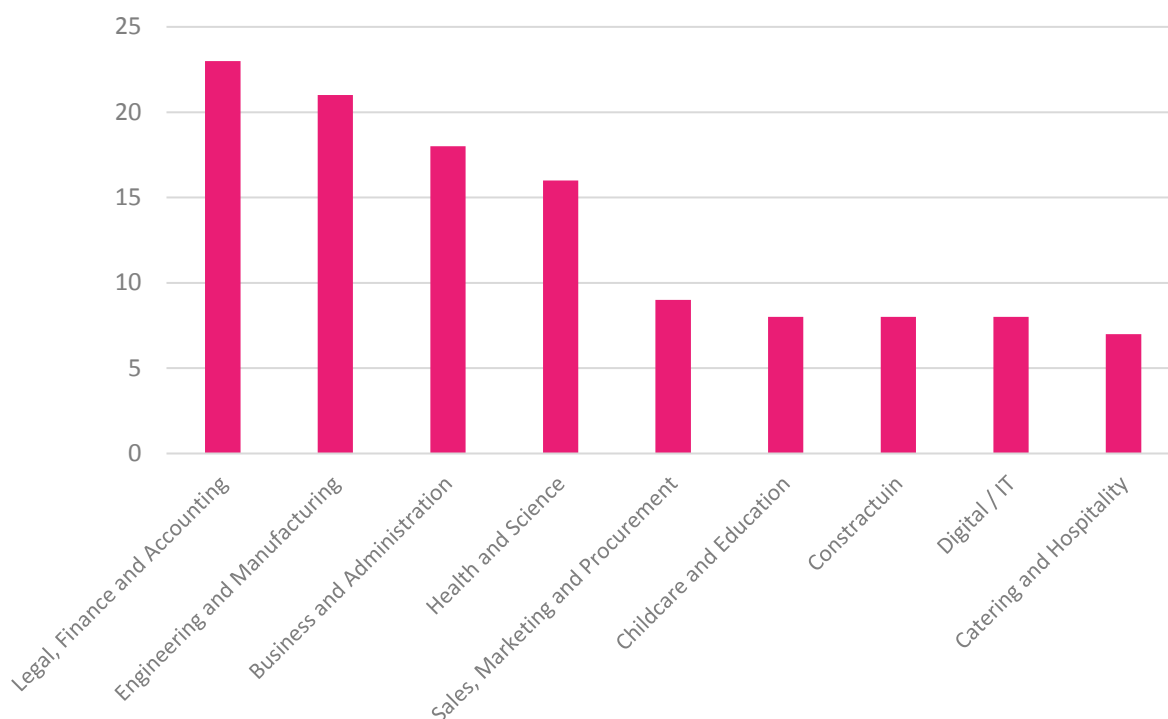
DfE, CSS

These statistics should also be seen in the context of other data. For instance, two thirds (68%) of leaders had previously worker as a teacher, trainer or lecturer in FE. Three quarters of principals had at least ten years' experience as a leader in FE. As the DfE notes, 'this suggests, for many principals, their role is the culmination of lengthy progression through a series of teaching and leadership roles in FE'.[68]

Our own analysis of web profiles of principals supports this conclusion. Most profiles highlight the teaching background of the principal. Other backgrounds and channels into the principal's position include: college management, public sector or military leadership and external private sector backgrounds.

The 'Teaching Route' into FE leadership

The most common pathway into the role of Principal is the teaching route: a leader who has entered education as a teacher and has progressed through various levels of management.

Those who followed the teaching route are far from homogenous in their backgrounds, skills and experiences, with different curriculum specialisms and past industry experience.

Colleges are typically offer a range of career progression opportunities. Many colleges are divided into three main areas: curriculum and quality; internal operations, human resource and finance; and external commercial development and marketing. Some principals move through the curriculum roles, building on pedagogical expertise as they move to lead on curriculum for a discipline, to director of a broader portfolio of subjects, perhaps to director of student experience or quality management. From here they are likely to move into senior leadership as vice principal with responsibility for curriculum before taking the top job.

Alternatively, they may take on external commercial roles, such as director of apprenticeships or vice principal with responsibility for commercial development. These experiences are likely to broaden an individual's management skillset giving them a wider knowledge of the organisation, and thus feed into their ability to perform the role of principal effectively. A path through internal operations might lead from director of student services to chief operating office, although these roles are often taken by external candidates without teaching experience.

Teaching experience was viewed by interviewees as an important foundation to fulfilling the role of principal. For example, one interviewee who followed the teaching route started his career by taking a certificate in education before becoming a lecturer at two different FE colleges. He progressed to head up a curriculum area before moving into senior leadership as vice principal where amongst other things he was able to lead pedagogical improvements. From there he became Principal. He felt his route allowed him to "lead by example" and to drive learning quality within the college. More challenging was getting the opportunities to develop his skills in external commercial and internal operational roles.

Principals reported that having a teaching background gave them a clear understanding of the core work of their college. However, most with this background also acknowledged that much of their work as leaders was focussed on external commercial development and operational management, rather than pedagogy. Appointing the right people to senior roles was emphasised as extremely important, including as Chief Financial Officer and to commercial roles. As past work by the Education and Training Foundation concluded: 'the skills required by outstanding teachers were not always the same as those required by outstanding leaders, yet the sector had focused very much on leadership candidates with a teaching background'.[69]

Improving teaching and learning is important not only as the fundamental objective of an FE college, but also to the development of a sustainable business model. Principals noted that a poor Ofsted rating could be potentially ruinous for a college, reducing student numbers and undermining bids for contracts with local business. In contrast, an outstanding Ofsted score could yield business benefits.

The internal operational or commercial route into FE leadership

Leaders can also progress in colleges through non-teaching roles, such as operations, finance or external commercial roles. Some individuals worked initially for large accountancy firms or within the finance department for corporations before entering FE into senior management roles. Others originated in roles such as human resources or external relations.

As indicated earlier, the delivery context in FE means that the competences of those from non-teaching backgrounds are increasingly important. The operational, staff-management, finance and commercial functions of colleges are large and growing, a result of mergers, the diversification of revenue streams, increased autonomy, competition and funding changes.

Internal operational roles include finance, funding, human resources, workforce development, student services and IT. Externally-focussed commercial roles include marketing, business development, employer relations and apprenticeships. Principals recognised that a knowledge of these areas is increasingly essential to successful leadership.

Leaders who had followed the internal non-teaching route reported that the experiences allowed them to understand the structure of the organisation and to have a strong overview of how different parts of the business fit together. Conversely, they recognised that their lack of teaching experience could create challenges. Having curriculum expertise within the leadership team and delegating effectively was perceived a crucial.

Most of the leaders interviewed, irrespective of the route they took, believed the internal operational and external commercial tasks took up significantly more of their time than curriculum and pedagogical responsibilities. Experience of financial management was considered especially important in cases where colleges were performing poorly financially.

The external route into FE leadership

A small proportion of Principals have come into FE leadership positions directly from senior leadership roles in other sectors. In our sample, principals with external background lead organisations with higher average turnovers.

Research undertaken in 2016 by FETL, AELP and the 157 Group argued that recruiting from outside the FE sector has often been successful, bringing a 'more commercial edge' and stimulating new thinking.[70] However, there have also been some recent resignations.[71]

Those recruited from outside the education sector come from a range of industries including telecoms, housing and engineering. Leaders who come directly into the chief executive role usually do so from an executive director position in the external industry with headhunting a common method of recruitment. They can bring with them a range of skills and experiences that may be valuable to the external commercial responsibilities of Principal as well as the internal organisational role. Commercial skills to run large complex organisations, lead strategic change, tender for contracts, build relationships and deliver a valuable end-product, were highlighted by interviewees as skills they brought to the role.

Leaders stressed their own lack of teaching experience and managing this by appointing individuals with a depth of pedagogical experience to senior management roles and being open to direction and advice on curriculum and quality matters.

Some are multi-campus colleges that are the result of mergers, with the campuses themselves have varying levels of autonomy. One such college had a 'principal' in charge of each campus, so that campuses almost acted as individual colleges.

The Public Sector Route into FE leadership

Principals also come from senior roles in other parts of the public sector. These include both the civil service and armed forces. They bring with them sector expertise, policy awareness and a recognition of the complex and changing nature of the sector and its funding. Some of them may have had teaching experience prior to joining the civil service.

Civil service leaders typically worked for the Department for Education, or government skills agencies. Principals highlighted in-depth knowledge of funding streams, up-to-date public policy awareness and a strategic vision built up from whole sector contextual awareness. They believed this was useful given the complex and changing nature of the FE sector.

Those from the military often were involved in staff training, with some having run training facilities. Given their backgrounds in teaching in military academies, these leaders could also be classified as having a teaching background.

Commentary

The breadth of leadership competences required in FE was reflected in interviewees' views: leaders who are recruited from within the sector do not necessarily have the ability to run large organisations, whilst those recruited from outside do not necessarily have the curriculum expertise. This echoes analysis completed in a study for DfE.[72]

Leadership teams are becoming increasingly important to cover the diverse range of responsibilities. This pluralisation of leadership responsibility is allowing for more of a balance between non-educational and educational expertise within the team.[73]

There is some disagreement over whether principals without teaching experience are suited to lead a GFE college.[74] Analysis by the CVER at LSE suggests that having a Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) is not associated with better educational outcomes for students.[75] Most principals we interviewed felt that teaching experience was not a prerequisite but that all principals needed to recognise the importance of the quality of educational provision if they are to run a successful college. There may be strong synergies for candidates joining from other parts of the public sector as such candidates already have exposure to the social mission of the public sector.

4. Parallel experiences in schools and universities

This section explores the backgrounds of executive leaders in schools and higher education and compares them with further education leadership.

The evolving role of school leaders

Structural change in the secondary school sector has been dominated by the move from local authority-maintained schools to autonomous academies funded directly by central government. The development of multi-academy trusts (MAT) has been encouraged by successive governments and has resulted in the creation of a range of new organisations with varying size and complexity. The largest multi-academy trusts contain 20 or 30 schools and educate tens of thousands of students, often with one legal governing body.

The role of the headteacher within many of these larger organisations has changed significantly, with increased leadership capacity leading to a more strategic role rather than the head of curriculum role of the past. With this change has come the opportunity to employ leaders without teaching experience who delegate pedagogical matters to experts within their leadership team. These leaders may bring with them commercial leadership experience and an ability to develop strategic vision for large organisations. This development is not without its critics, and question marks remain over the authority a headteacher without teaching experience can have over a staff room.[76]

Executive headteachers and CEOs, as an additional layer of strategic leadership, have become increasingly prevalent with the move towards multi academy trusts. An executive headteacher is defined as a headteacher who leads two or more schools with CEO describing someone who leads the largest multi academy organisations. In 2016 there were 620 executive headteachers in the school workforce spread over 970 schools.[77] The introduction of this new layer of leadership is designed to increase strategic and collaborative capacity with the government identifying both executive headteachers and CEOs as requiring 'a new and different mix of skills and experience'.[78] Executive headteachers often delegate operational tasks to other members of senior leadership so that they can focus on overall strategy.[79] These delegated tasks may include teaching, attendance, behaviour management, exclusions, staff appointments and parental contact.

In 2001, the requirement that the headteacher or leaders of a school must have qualified teacher status (QTS) was removed. The Ambition School Leadership programme offers the 'National Professional Qualification for Executive Leadership' to anyone with 'opportunity and ability' opening up a route into leadership for those from non-teaching backgrounds, whereas the equivalent qualification for headteacher requires an applicant to already be a senior leader within a school. Despite this, non-teaching leaders remain rare. A 2016 NFER report cited 98% of executive head teachers as having qualified teacher status and it is likely that the proportion is just as high among headteachers. Bigger MATs sometimes employ non-teaching leaders, but rarely, and these in the form of CEOs which are far rarer than Executive headteachers.

University leadership

The university sector is very diverse. Universities operate in an increasingly competitive market following the introduction of fees and loans, and more recent reforms to apprenticeships. Universities have expanded in size as the proportion of young people attending higher education has risen in the last two decades. These changes have brought larger operational functions and external partnership departments and a need for more commercial activity.

University Vice-Chancellors (VCs) predominantly come from an academic background, the equivalent of the teaching route within FE colleges. VCs have often had a distinguished academic career before taking on the role of leader. However, there are exceptions to this in the UK, with some VCs coming from a non-academic route often directly from industry, much like the external leadership route in FE colleges. [80] As universities have grown, and their administrative functions professionalised, they have developed far larger professional services and administration departments. Our conversations with individuals from the sector indicate that it is becoming more likely that managers can progress from administrative routes into senior roles as the running of universities becomes more marketized and complex.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Findings and conclusions from this research

FE colleges are at a watershed moment. Policy changes, a shifting landscape and a tight financial settlement are leading to question marks over the future viability of some FE colleges. The environment is increasingly commercial and competitive. Funding streams are increasingly complex. Institutions are fewer in number and larger in size than in the past. Ensuring that colleges have leaders who possess the requisite skills and experiences to lead such institutions is this challenging environment is fundamentally important.

Skills required

As Part II suggests, the range of competences required has expanded and is diverse: pedagogy and curriculum; internal operations and finance; community leadership and partnerships; and external commercial relationships. It is becoming increasingly difficult for leaders to be skilled across the full range of college functions. Effective delegation to heads of pedagogy, organisational management, community partnership or commercial activity is acknowledged by Principals as paramount. However, the sheer range of necessary skills is challenging.

Where college leaders come from

The role of principal has evolved to focus more on commercial relationships and operations and finance, with less focus than in the past on pedagogy and curriculum development. This pattern contrasts with the background profile of FE leaders. That isn't to say that the sector should steer away from developing teachers as leaders, rather that such individuals will need to be supported to build a rounded skills-set. A strong conveyor belt of talent through the system which arms future leaders with the necessary breadth and depth of skills and experiences is fundamentally important.

Other – though less common – routes include progressing up the managerial functions in further education (such as finance); transferring from a civil service or government career; and entering senior management from a private sector business background. We believe that greater consideration could be given to recruiting from 'contiguous' areas – such as government, local government, wider public sector and the military – where familiarity with public value mission of colleges may already exist.

Demographics

FE leaders age demographic indicates that many will retire in the near future and that the pipeline of future leaders needs to be prepared.

Developing future leaders

This report has focused on the skills needed and who current college leaders are.

In the next phase of the work we will explore the steps that the sector and government can take to develop leaders for the future. Lessons can be learnt not least from other parts of the public sector where paths into leadership positions from outside have been established.

Questions we will be addressing in the next phase of the work include:

- How can we help current leaders acquire the breadth of skills and competences, from pedagogy through to commercial and community leadership.?
- How can FE grow the next generation of leaders from within the sector? Is there a case for a more established route for leadership progression in further education?
- How can FE draw from a wider pool of talent for future leaders?
- What lessons can be learnt from other sectors such as schools, higher education and the wider public sector?
- What incentives, rewards and policies would attract people to enter and stay in the sector (e.g. pay, rewards, status, operational autonomy)?
- Can more be done to help leaders learn from each other?

Annex 1: Research methods

To research the experiences and skills of FE leaders we undertook internet research and conducted interviews with principals. We analysed information from all profiles where relevant evidence was available. We explored whether and how leaders' backgrounds and roles varied with the size of the college and revenue streams. As of August 2018, there were 179 General Further education colleges.[81] We went to the websites of these colleges to find biographies for the current Principals. Of these, 92 had biographies that gave details about the principal's experiences and skills. This means we were able to profile half of college principals.[82] A further 11 had information that was useful for other purposes.

Through analysis of online biographies and our discussions we identified four common routes into Principal positions that came with a distinctive and identifiable set of skills. Of the 103 online profiles, we were able to categorise 92.

We note that the website content is written by or on behalf of college principals and therefore may tell us how they want to be perceived as well as factual content. For instance, principals may emphasise aspects of their background that they feel are particularly relevant to the sector.

We combined this information on colleges with ESFA college accounts data which allowed us to observe the size of the FE college in which a specific type of Principal worked.

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