



THE WAY WE WORK

PAUL WARNER
NOVEMBER 2020



FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

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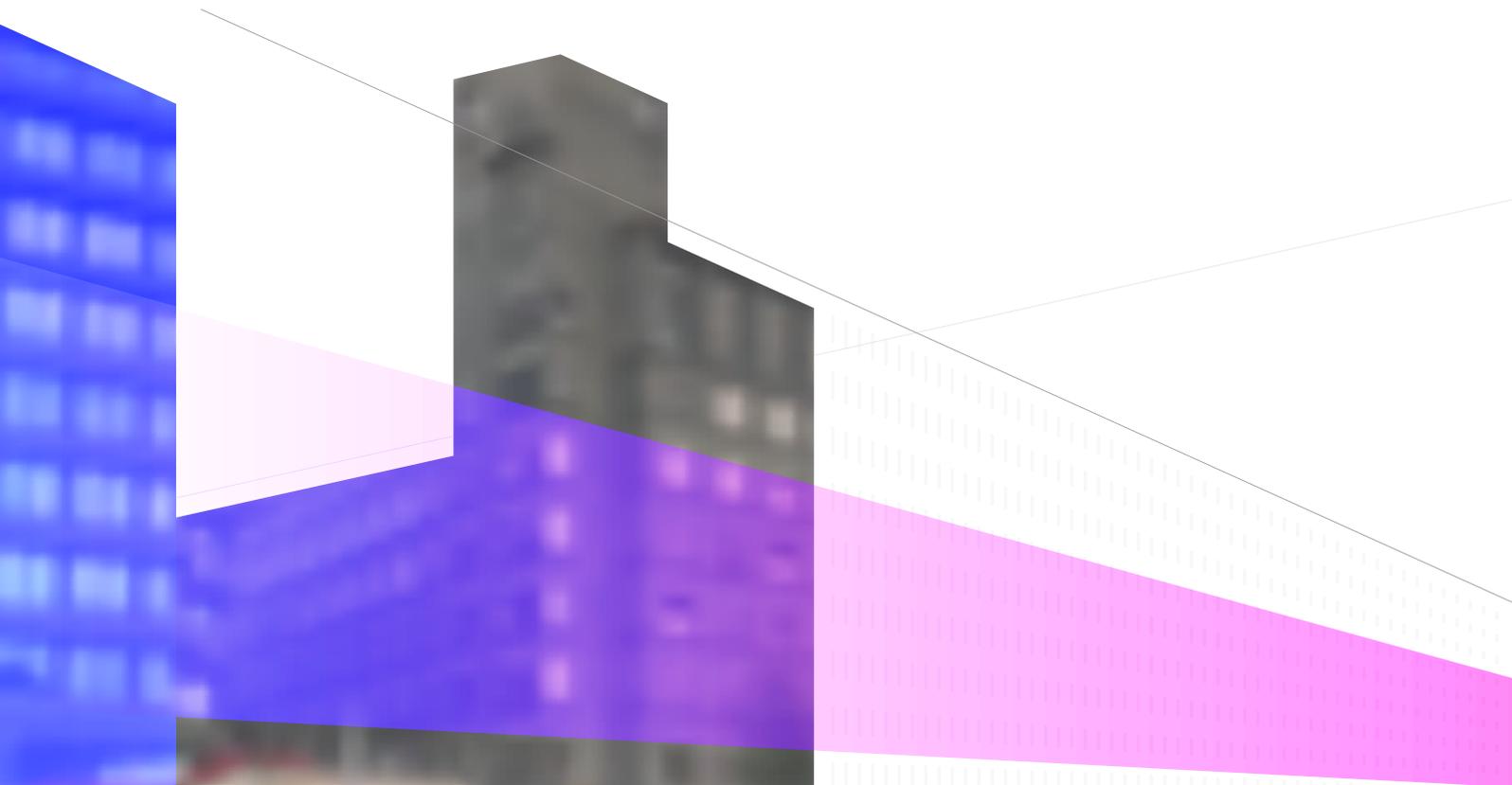
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THE AUTHOR

PAUL WARNER



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He would like to extend his thanks to colleagues who have read and commented on drafts of the survey and this report, and particularly to Dame Ruth Silver and the Further Education Trust for Leadership whose support has been instrumental in making this report happen.

ABOUT FETL



The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:

- » Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers
- » Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- » Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

ABOUT AELP RESEARCH



AELP Research is a division of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) dedicated to conducting research activities that are in the interests of AELP members and the wider FE sector. AELP is a national membership organisation that represents the interests of over 800 organisations delivering the majority of England's apprenticeships as well as English, maths, study programmes, and other vocational and technical qualifications.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report looks at how leadership was demonstrated in the further education and skill sector of the UK during the period of the national Covid-19 lockdown between March and September 2020.

Through a combination of desk research, a survey of sector leaders conducted in September 2020, and with reference to other surveys and publications it examines in particular how the leadership of four government bodies was perceived during this period:

- » The Department for Education (DfE)
- » Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)
- » The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE)
- » Ofsted

Of particular interest was whether or not the actions and decisions they took in this period have affected how their authority and leadership is viewed by the leaders of sector stakeholder organisations, and whether the relationship with them may have altered as a result.

THE REPORT POSES FOUR MAIN QUESTIONS:

1

Did the experience change the nature of the relationship between the government, its agencies, and the sector?

These relationships did not appear to fundamentally alter as a result of the experience of lockdown. Sector leaders seemed to hold the view that each organisation behaved more or less as they might be expected to, with no evidence of enhanced collaboration and trust suddenly becoming evident as a result of the emergency circumstances.

2

Did the government's response – or lack of it – affect how their authority is viewed by the sector?

Broadly government and regulators reacted and behaved more or less how everyone expected them to react and behave, reflecting some not-unwelcome stability in the system. The controversy over A-level exam results made no particular difference to overall perceptions, and merely seemed to evidence what many in the sector felt they already knew – that government did not understand the sector and had been too slow to react to problems.

3

What implications might the sudden shift to widescale online learning and remote working have to the way further education is thought about and delivered once the emergency abates?

A clear theme that emerged was that many in the sector found that they were not as far down the path of being ready for online and distance learning as they had thought; or at least, that there was further to go to make it a viable working proposition than they had appreciated. Some sector leaders seemed to express mild surprise at the organisational benefits that rapidly accrued from this, with some admitting they had not really given enough thought previously to the subject, and leading them to ask (or even berate) themselves as to why this was the case.

4

What thinking needs to be undertaken in terms of contingency planning against any future emergency of this nature?

The sector feels that not much worse could happen than the almost complete closure of the economy and the effective house arrest of much of the population in March 2020. The pressure to adapt and react to this at the time was immense but sector leaders feel that on the whole they did the right things, acknowledging the role of trade bodies in providing support, guidance and an articulation of their views and positions as they did so.

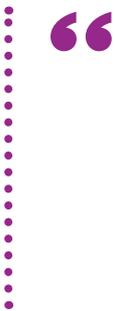
There is however work that needs to be undertaken more widely on implementing effective blended learning:

- » The unreadiness of some staff to work with the technology
- » The effect of a lack of personal human contact on motivation and engagement
- » The difficulty of replicating practical elements of learning on a remote basis
- » The extent of digital deficits amongst learners in terms of connectivity, hardware and software

In terms of the individual organisations, DfE in particular was felt not to have a clear understanding of the challenges that the sector faced either before or during the lockdown, which was also reflected in the actions and decisions of the ESFA who were obligated to act on DfE policy instructions. IfATE's relationship with the sector was not ideal before the pandemic with stakeholders feeling they were not trusted, a view that persisted through lockdown. All three organisations were variously criticised by respondents for a slowness of response, though this did not in itself appear to significantly affect the ability of sector stakeholders to react appropriately to the operational and other challenges with which they were faced in this period.

At the other extreme, Ofsted had been held in high regard by the sector prior to lockdown, and during lockdown itself succeeded only in reinforcing and even extending this view. This appeared to have much to do with their perceived clear sightlines to the issues and challenges that the sector faced, possibly because of the high level of former practitioners that Ofsted is staffed by.

The report discusses these findings and relates them to the concept of “leadership” as expressed by the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL)



a kind of far-sighted sensitivity to the here-and-now challenges faced by your community that transcends the task-oriented activity ... (and) conveys a deep sense both of relatedness and of open-ended, future-focused concern “

(Silver, 2020b).

It is less clear whether this leadership stemmed from a deliberate sense of purpose, or whether it was an almost inevitable derivative of the situation, but either way its manifestation presents an opportunity for the sector in its broadest sense to evaluate its own performance and effectiveness, and to use this as the basis of improvement for the future.

The report therefore draws some broad conclusions:

- » That the further education and skills sector was not as prepared for the shift to online learning as it had assumed it was
- » That nevertheless it took huge steps to mitigate and these deficiencies quickly and effectively wherever it could
- » That the relative lack of trust in the supply side that it felt had been demonstrated previously by most agencies of government threatened to – but ultimately did not – hold back the ability of the sector to make these changes
- » Some residual suspicion remains amongst sector leaders that however much they feel they have reacted well and learnt from the experience, this will not positively affect the way the sector is governed and regulated from above in the future.

- » In this respect, DfE and IfATE are felt to have much to learn from the actions and response of Ofsted – whilst ESFA appears to have been viewed as (to some extent) “apparatchiks”, functionaries of their political masters and therefore inevitably bound to reflect the weaknesses of their leadership.

AS A RESULT, THE REPORT MAKES FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS:

1

There is an opportunity for the sector to learn much more about itself by properly examining the application of leadership during lockdown – but for this to have benefits across the economy as a whole, government and the civil service must be prepared to do likewise. Both sides must be honest enough to acknowledge any shortcomings they may identify as a result, and both sides must commit to acting to remedy these in a constructive and collaborative fashion.

2

There is little doubt that the sector responded well to the lockdown, and this demonstration of ability, capacity and leadership should be reflected in a shift in the perception of the government and its regulators towards the sector through increased trust and a better appreciation of the impact of their rules on the vast majority who try to do the right thing.

3

The role of mental health in learning and recall needs to be better understood by sector practitioners.

4

The sector must better embrace the challenges and benefits of remote learning technologies more fully by understanding the technology better, utilising it in their delivery and ensuring that staff and learners have the basic tools to be able to make it work for them.

5

Government must do more to work with the sector to ensure that regulation and metrics of performance can make these technological opportunities work to the best advantage of everybody.

FOREWORDS

JANE HICKIE



The publication of these AELP research findings, commissioned by FETL, has coincided with a second Covid-related lockdown for England with no certainty that it will be a short-term measure. They have real value in offering what lessons can be learnt from the first lockdown to enable as much provision in further education and skills to take place over the coming weeks in a way that benefits individual learners and the economy. The lessons not only apply to learning providers but also to government and its agencies.

It is important to recognise that some of the impacts of a lockdown are unavoidable, especially when it comes to learning which takes place in the workplace. For example, there are usually up to half a million apprentices gaining new skills on the job and during the summer, the majority of them were asked to carry on learning as much as they could remotely; others were furloughed with learning still allowed, while hundreds were sadly made redundant. With the furlough scheme now extended, it is hoped that thousands more redundancies will be avoided. The need to reskill adult workers, either still in jobs or facing unemployment, was not a new challenge during the summer but it suddenly became a much more urgent one.

This report highlights the extraordinary and swift response of providers at the start of the first lockdown to shift training and assessment online but the findings do not present a picture of unadulterated success. The research found that the further education and skills sector was not as prepared for the shift to online learning as it had assumed it was and therefore AELP and FETL recommend that the sector must better embrace the challenges and benefits of remote learning technologies more fully by understanding the technology better, utilising it in their delivery and ensuring that staff and learners have the basic tools to be able to make it work for them. From what we are hearing, many providers are seeking out external expertise to secure improvements if they do not possess it in-house.

Other areas for providers to address include the effect of a lack of personal human contact on motivation and engagement, the difficulty of replicating practical elements of learning on a remote basis and the extent of digital deficits among learners in terms of connectivity, hardware and software. Furthermore mental health is increasingly seen as potentially altering the whole ability of someone to learn, and to recall what they have previously learnt.

We should not underestimate the impact of the ‘digital divide’ on disadvantaged learners and this has been starkly illustrated in the debate over whether it was wise to stop at the end of July the Covid-related rule flexibility which allowed teacher assessed results for functional skills tests. As the pandemic goes on, it is reasonable to ask whether other rule flexibilities should continue beyond their planned end dates.

As the reports explains, it took a long time before some of the 36 flexibilities, which were requested by AELP at the beginning of the lockdown to maintain as much learning as possible, were introduced and often in the absence of relevant guidance, our advice to member providers was simply ‘to do what’s best for the learner’. Frustration with the slowness of the regulators’ response was reflected in the interviews conducted for the research.

The sector leaders felt that a long held lack of trust in providers lay behind the delays and therefore the slowness did not come as a surprise. Only Ofsted has escaped criticism in this respect.

It is too soon to say whether leaders' perceptions of the government's understanding of the sector have improved since the research was undertaken but it is vital that policymakers' understanding of the challenges facing providers is on a sound footing. At AELP, we have been encouraged by the ESFA statement on collaboration, communication and clarity which was issued in late June 2020 and there are definitely signs that the commitments are being backed up by deeds. Similarly, IfATE is listening to what we have to say on the funding of apprenticeship standards and DfE officials are willing to consult in confidence on policy changes.

These improvements do not detract from the need to give this report a full read. The continuation of the pandemic means that mistakes made the first time around are not repeated. We cannot afford to let employers and learners down in terms of trying to reduce the negative impact of Covid and supporting an economic recovery when it starts.



Jane Hickie

Managing Director

Association of Employment and Learning Providers

DAME RUTH SILVER



The Covid-19 pandemic has asked difficult questions of us all, and nowhere more than in the education sector.

The obvious – and very important – story here is one of disruption and resilience, the capacity to adapt, among both staff and students, and the bravery and diligence of frontline workers. But the pandemic is also having a profound impact on how we think and feel about our roles and functions within the further education sector, as well as on how we conceptualise the sector’s wider purpose, and our own place in delivering and upholding that.

This is fascinating and largely unexplored territory, which is why the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) was keen to support the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) in this ambitious and timely study of the impact of the Covid crisis on the sector and, in particular, its effect on relationships and the authorities that underpin them. It is particularly important that we look beyond colleges and focus equally on the impact on independent providers in this. Too often, in our reflections about the sector, our gaze is splintered and our stories incomplete.

The impact of the pandemic on further education and skills is a hugely important topic, and I was personally very pleased that the AELP chose to focus the study, in part, on authorities and relationships. My own impression is that a new authority and confidence has indeed arisen among staff as they have striven to undertake both their everyday responsibilities and new complexities in facing and handling the crisis. In the process, new spaces were created in which agency could be exercised, effectively dispersing leadership to a greater extent than before within organisations.

This is true at the level of frontline staff, but also, I think, at the level of institutional leadership, where gaps in national leadership, perhaps inevitable in such fast-changing circumstances, have had to be filled in creative and enterprising ways at the level of the senior leadership team or even in workshops and classrooms (or virtual equivalents). A wider expression of this shift can be identified in the increasing tension between local and national leadership, which is again challenging long-standing ways of doing things in the UK (notably, the over-centralised nature of our politics and our tolerance of inequality), while laying bare some of the realities and limitations of the localism agenda.

Of course, it is far from clear what trends will stick and how things will further develop, against the backdrop of continuing lockdowns and economic uncertainty. But it is critical that we begin asking the questions now. This report begins that learning process by sharing what our colleagues have to say about the challenges they have encountered and how they have faced them. The report offers strong insight and opinions on this, showing, among other things, how, not for the first time, the most profound impact in education and training has been felt on the frontline.

We are still learning, and there is much more work to be done to understand fully the impact of the pandemic on further education. It is clear already, however, that some perceptions are changing, not least about the potential of technology in teaching and learning (and the capacities of providers to adapt), the nature of leadership within organisations and the importance of trust and agency, and the relationship between learning and inequality. We will be sifting through this for some time. But we must begin, as this study does, by listening and understanding the impact on the ground.



Dame Ruth Silver

President

Further Education Trust for Leadership

1. INTRODUCTION



From this evening, I must give the British people a very simple instruction – you must stay at home ”

**UK Prime Minister Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP;
live televised address to the nation, 23rd March 2020**

This “very simple instruction” marked the beginning of an unprecedented national crisis; an almost complete shutdown of the UK economy to prevent the spread of a new and deadly respiratory virus for which there was no treatment or cure.

Unsurprisingly, instructions that start out as “very simple” can ultimately impact in very many complex and usually unforeseen ways. It therefore soon became apparent that the stay-home instruction was wreaking extensive damage to lifestyles, livelihoods and the economy as a whole. A balance had to be reached between keeping people safe from the virus but maintaining a degree of normal life to enable the economy and 21st-century life to resume and continue. The population looked to government and its agencies for leadership, largely accepting that under such unprecedented and monumental pressures some mistakes may be made, but being prepared to work with this if, on balance, they trusted the competence and integrity of those in charge.

This piece looks at how this position of leadership translated into the further education and vocational skills sector – how it impacted on provision, and how the leaders of these organisations viewed the instructions and guidance they were being given. Lockdown presaged for example a sudden shift to online and remote working of both staff and learners, with providers trying to keep learning alive whilst trying to accommodate the cancellation of examinations, fast-paced changes in regulation and the closure of places of work and learning. This was overshadowed by not only the unfamiliar

pressures of learners learning remotely via teachers and trainers who were similarly working from home, but the lingering threat of staff furloughs, redundancies, or complete company closures – maybe even their own.

This work therefore examines whether in this arena, the government is seen to have had a “good pandemic”. Our aim was to explore four questions:

1 Did the experience change the nature of the relationship between the government, its agencies, and the sector?

2 Did the government’s response – or lack of it – affect how their authority is viewed by the sector?

3 What implications might the sudden shift to widescale online learning and remote working have to the way further education is thought about and delivered once the emergency abates?

4 What thinking needs to be undertaken in terms of contingency planning against any future emergency of this nature?

With the support of the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL), AELP was able to undertake extensive desk research into the timeline of the virus and the correlation with departmental and sector announcements and responses: to examine evidence of previous pandemic situations to see how national economies had responded and how/whether our sector had been affected in similar ways; to analyse and following up on responses to a comprehensive survey of sector leaders that examined how their organisations adapted to the situation; and examine whether the government’s handling of the pandemic had affected thinking and relationships going forward. All this has come together to inform the findings of this report.

2. THE ORIGINS OF THE PANDEMIC

The response of the post-16 sector must be understood in the context of the pandemic and lockdown as a whole. Individual leaders within the sector will have been influenced in their reaction to sector-specific developments and their subsequent decision-making by their own wider perceptions of how the situation was being handled by the government and by the nation as a whole. This chapter therefore gives a brief overview of the progress of the disease in the UK up until the point of lockdown on March 23rd 2020, giving a backdrop to how sector leaders responded to government thereafter.

The first known human infections of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) were in Wuhan, China in late 2019, with the earliest symptom onsets becoming evident on 1st December (Wu et al, 2020: 217-220). By the 30th January 2020 the outbreak was severe enough to be classed as a ‘public health emergency of international concern’ by the World Health Organisation (WHO) – a definition that is a last-resort call to action necessitating an immediate international response. By the 11th March, the WHO had officially declared a pandemic, with their Director-General declaring, “We are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction..... Some countries are struggling with a lack of capacity. Some countries are struggling with a lack of resources. Some countries are struggling with a lack of resolve.” (WHO, 2020)

On the same day in Britain, Chancellor Rishi Sunak was announcing his annual budget, which included £30bn in measures designed to protect the economy from the virus (Schomberg et al, 2020). This level of financial commitment was designed to show how seriously the government was taking the prospect of the virus, as there was some disquiet already evident that the government’s response did not appear to align with the emerging evidence of the virus taking a serious and deadly hold in Italy and Spain in particular. On the 3rd March government had published an action plan to mitigate against the virus (UK Government, 2020) that warned that up to 20% of the workforce could

be absent from work as a result of it. Yet on the same day, the Prime Minister publicly joked that he was still shaking hands with everyone, including at a hospital treating coronavirus patients (Grey and Macaskill, 2020) adding “I want to stress that for the vast majority of the people of this country, we should be going about our business as usual.” (UK Government, 2020b).

This approach was however coming under increasing pressure very quickly. On the 12th March ITV’s Robert Peston reported that the government’s strategy was “to allow the virus to pass through the entire population so that we acquire herd immunity” (Peston, 2020) despite findings from models run by Imperial College which claimed that such a strategy could result in hundreds of thousands of deaths (Calvert et al, 2020). Although it was denied subsequently that the concept of achieving herd immunity through a 60% rate of infection was ever government policy, the report by Robert Peston and the government’s slowness to clarify comments by the government’s Chief Scientific Adviser (that were intended to say that herd immunity might be a consequence of the pandemic rather than a deliberately achieved objective), succeeded merely in sowing anxiety and confusion further (Yong, 2020).

The speed and spread of the outbreak were undoubtedly a factor in some of the mixed messaging that appeared to be coming from government at this time. Only five days after the budget, on the 16th March, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport issued official guidance in which “it is advised that large gatherings should not take place”(UK Government, 2020c) even though there had been no moves to cancel the Cheltenham festival in the previous few days which around 250,000 had attended and which was later suspected of being a “super-spreader” event (*Bedingfield, 2020*).

On the 18th March, the government told NHS hospitals to move their elderly patients into care homes even if they had tested positive for Covid-19, a move that would generate extensive controversy in months to come¹.

¹ Bill Hanage, a British infectious-disease epidemiologist based at Harvard University asked at the time, “Who do you think works at those nursing homes? Highly trained gibbons? ... It’s the people who are in that exact age group you are expecting to be infectious.” (Yong, 2020).

On the same day there was a significant announcement from the Department of Education (DfE) that all schools, colleges and early years settings would shut from the afternoon of the 20th March until further notice to all children except those of key workers and other vulnerable children, and that all examinations scheduled for the summer were to be cancelled (UK Government, 2020d). On the 20th March further guidance came out from DfE regarding the awarding of grades for cancelled exams which would in August prove to be at the heart of another contentious and controversial episode in the pandemic:

“

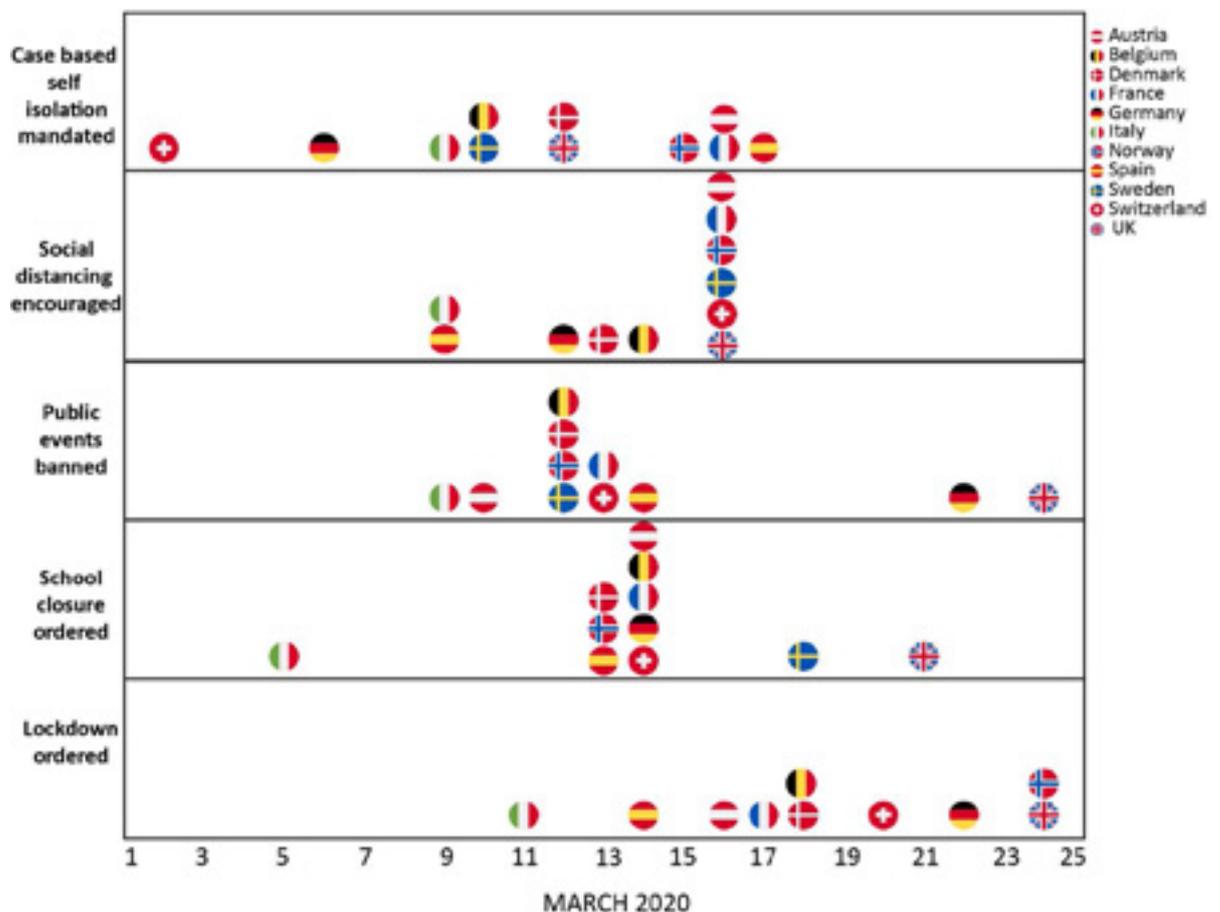
(We must ensure that) GCSE, A and AS level students are awarded a grade which fairly reflects the work that they have put in. There will also be an option to sit an exam early in the next academic year for students who wish to. Ofqual will develop and set out a process that will provide a calculated grade to each student which reflects their performance as fairly as possible, and will work with the exam boards to ensure this is consistently applied for all students. The exam boards will be asking teachers, who know their students well, to submit their judgement about the grade that they believe the student would have received if exams had gone ahead ”

(UK Government, 2020e)

As both infection rates and the death toll began to accelerate, on the 20th March the Prime Minister ordered all cafes, pubs and restaurants to close that evening, with nightclubs, theatres, cinemas and gyms closing “as soon as they reasonably can.” (BBC, 2020). But it was not enough - three days later, on Monday 23rd March, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson went on live television across the nation to take a step that even three weeks before had seemed impossible to imagine – to instruct the public to stay at home except for certain “very limited purposes” – shopping for essential items (such as food and medicine); one form of outdoor exercise each day (such

as running, walking or cycling), either alone or with others who live in the same household; for any medical need, or to provide care to a vulnerable person; and to travel to and from work only where “absolutely necessary” and the work in question could not be done from home. Furthermore, all non-essential shops, libraries, places of worship, playgrounds and outdoor gyms were closed, and police given powers of enforcement, including the use of fines. (BBC, 2020).

Dateline of European counter-Covid measures



Source: Imperial College, 2020

It is important to note that despite the unprecedented nature of the lockdown² it was still not as extensive as had taken place in many other countries, avoiding for example curfews or travel bans. and generally imposing counter-Covid measures later than most of its European neighbours. Furthermore, the government did not trigger the Civil Contingencies Act, designed for the most serious emergencies. As UK daily deaths from the pandemic peaked at 1,166 on 21st April, (Worldometer, 2020) the feeling that the coronavirus presented an unprecedented threat to our way of life and that there would not be a quick or easy resumption of normality was taking a firm hold.

Whether all this amounts to a positive response or not is not the subject of this paper, but it is important to note as context for the way that the population – and FE sector leaders in particular – reacted. The post-16 sector, along with everyone else, found itself in a position it had never faced before – their facilities were shut to everyone (except vulnerable children and those of key workers), with the vast majority of learning having to take place over digital platforms using content and curriculum that in many cases had not been designed with this primary use in mind. Examinations had been cancelled but there was (as yet) no detail on how learners would receive grades for their studies. The vast majority of the post-16 workforce suddenly and instantly found themselves working from home, having to balance the demands of home life and the new and very unfamiliar working situation that had been imposed upon them.

And for sector leaders, there was another huge issue that came to the fore instantly – how would their companies survive? If employer businesses were shut, could work-based and work-related learning even take place? And if not, would this mean the funding dried up, and with it the prospects of survival for many in the sector already under pressure from the constrained public finances of the previous decade?

² Even during the flu pandemic of 1918/19 that killed around 50m people globally, UK schools were not ordered to close by government (Arnold, 2020), whilst the 1957 flu pandemic which at its peak was killing 600 a week in Britain was described by the Junior Health Minister of the time merely as “a heaven-sent topic for the press during the ‘silly season.’” (Honigsbaum, 2020)

3. THE POST-16 SECTOR PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC

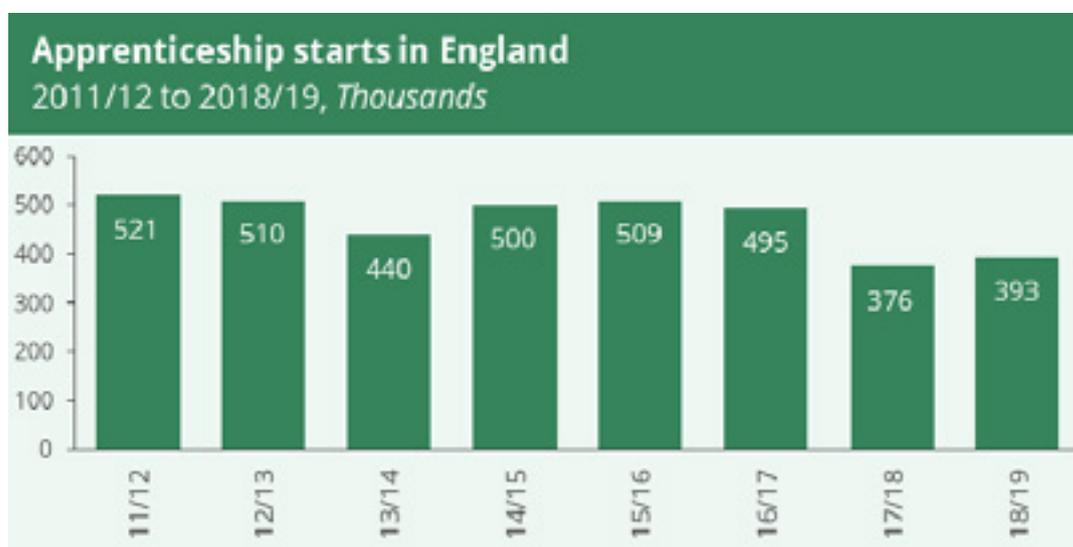
A trade press review of 2019 (FE Week, 2019) gives a good general impression of the major issues that had been concerning the sector prior to the advent of the coronavirus crisis. There was ongoing concern about funding, particularly with regard to the finances of colleges, many of which appeared to one extent or another to be experiencing serious deficit difficulties – Hadlow College had in May 2019 become the first college to be put into administration and it was reported that Bradford College had skirted perilously close to it.

Of most interest however was how the new Conservative government under Boris Johnson, elected with a 76-seat majority on December 12th, would treat the sector. It was well known that T Levels – new technical qualifications at Level 3 aimed primarily at 16-18 year olds – would be launching in September 2020, the design and the timetable for which were both subjects of concern, not least because of the integral need for every learner to undertake an extended “industry placement”, presenting a number of challenges for the sector which had not yet been satisfactorily resolved (AELP, 2018). There had also been promises of a £600m/year National Skills Fund creating a “right to retrain”, details for which were being eagerly awaited as to what this might mean in practice. The former Chancellor, Sajid Javid, had also put an extra £400m into provision for 16-18 year old learners.

However, what was missing from the Conservative election manifesto was a solution to the emerging budget issues that had become evident since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in 2017, or any indication of a new numerical starts target for it. Indeed, the levy – a 0.5% payroll tax imposed on companies with paybills of over £3m p.a. ringfenced to pay for apprenticeship training – had dominated debate in the sector for some years prior to 2020, as it overhauled the system in every respect including content, design, implementation, funding and delivery.

The policy narrative behind this radical overhaul led with the concept of “employers in the driving seat” (Warner and Gladding, 2018) – that the vocational skills sector had for too long been driven by the supply side instead of paying proper regard to the needs of employers, leading to a plethora of relatively poor quality apprenticeships that did not meet the needs of the business and the UK economy. The policy was underpinned by a high-profile manifesto commitment in 2015 by the Conservative Party to achieve 3m apprenticeship starts by 2020 if elected (Conservative Party, 2015: 18).

Apprenticeships had therefore been the pre-eminent item on the post-16 agenda for some years prior to 2020. The government had consistently championed their “gold standard” nature and significant amounts of financial and political capital had been expended on ensuring the launch of the levy, and the apprenticeship programme in general, was a success. Despite this, apprenticeship starts under the apprenticeship levy system were disappointing, with a significant fall in the first year of the levy’s operation (2017/18) and only small increases thereafter;



Source: (UK Parliament, 2020)

In March 2020, just before lockdown, the latest figures for apprenticeship starts were arguably staging a small comeback; 198,600 starts in the previous quarter was 2.3% up on the previous year (UK Government, 2020f), but still considerably down on the equivalent figure for the year before the levy was introduced of 251,500 (UK Government, 2016). It had not gone unnoticed by the sector that over the intervening period, mention of the 3m target had grown steadily less frequent, before apparently being quietly dropped in August 2018 (Burke, 2018). Apprenticeships were mentioned only five times in the entire Conservative manifesto of 2019, and even then without any commitment to how many might be created in the next Parliament (Conservative Party, 2019).

Particularly in the early days of the levy and its planning, the sector felt it had been inadequately consulted about changes that could be fundamental to its very future (Robertson, 2016). Many providers felt they had been “blamed” for an apparent lack of quality and relevance in apprenticeships prior to the levy, even though the government’s own research had demonstrated no particular level of employer dissatisfaction with what already existed (AELP, 2014 / UK Government, 2014a / UK Government 2014b). The restructuring of funding had additionally led to an influx of new providers into the market, many of questionable quality, which gave rise to concerns that even the exhortations of “high quality” apprenticeship provision had been sacrificed in the ultimately unsuccessful race to reach an arbitrary start target of 3m apprenticeships that appeared to bear no relation to labour market information³.

3 Former Skills Minister Nick Boles has admitted the 3m figure was fairly arbitrary. In an interview with the Institute for Government in November 2017 he said, “We had delivered two million apprenticeships in the 2010–15 parliament, so in the manifesto process, there was a classic exercise in ‘well, okay, what are we going to promise for the next parliament? ... There was this feeling that you can’t say two-and-a-half million – that sounds a bit tame, nobody would be excited by that – so we’re going to say three million. Then three million is really a lot of apprenticeships, it’s big growth.” (Thornton and Kidney-Bishop, 2017)

There were also abiding concerns with the opaque process for setting funding rates for apprenticeships, with the major apprenticeship trade the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) being particularly vocal in its criticism of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) for a perceived failure to give sufficient funding for some critical apprenticeship standards (AELP, 2019) , whilst simultaneously dismissing employer demands for others to be created (Camden, 2020).

An additional external “macro” pressure was the long-running “Brexit” process of the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, which in many (if not most) commentators’ minds was actually the single most important issue of the 2019 General Election by some margin despite the matter having apparently been decided by a referendum in 2016. There was considerable debate still happening as to whether the withdrawal as a whole, and the arrangements which would govern how trade and the economy would operate afterwards in particular, would benefit the economy or not, and in what timespan. Of more immediate concern to the post-16 sector was that whichever way the debate was cut, there would be a need for the training infrastructure to produce far more workers with intermediate skills in particular than was currently the case. Given that apprenticeship start numbers had dropped significantly over the last two years and were only struggling to regain even a semblance of the momentum they once had, there was a feeling that providers might once again be being lined up to be the fall guys for any perceived failure of policy.

The sector was therefore feeling under pressure. FETL (2020) have articulated some of the general pressure on sector leaders at this time that all this was contributing to; “a culture of constant reform, (combining) extreme financial constraint and high expectations (with an) overbearing , sometimes unfair, system of accountability.” It described the genuine concern amongst leaders that regulation and intervention was “operating in a punitive way, aiming to demonstrate accountability through changes in leadership more than it is focused on improving learner outcomes”.

Stephen Exley (2020) has also looked at the experiences of leaders of a number of governing and regulatory bodies, quoting one CEO complaining of a pervasive blame culture that threatened sometimes to destroy careers; “They made that decision at the time with the information available and thought it was the right thing to do. If we don’t let people learn from their mistakes then we’re never as a sector going to move on.” Exley says that whilst the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) claimed to “hold providers to account for their performance to ensure (that they) consistently raise standards”, that Ofsted aimed “to be a force for improvement through our inspections”, and that regulators were united in a desire to make things better, sector leaders felt that increasingly the effect that they were having was precisely the opposite.

At the same time, many sector leaders could not absolve themselves entirely from some of the system deficiencies and pressures that lockdown brought into stark relief. The immediate requirement to shift to remote learning surprisingly seemed to catch a number of providers out, even though blended learning was already widely recognised option for learning delivery across the sector. As Crowther (2020) has pointed out,

“

an immediate and critical issue ... was the move to remote learning, which was fairly predictable given the nature of the pandemic ... This all too often revealed longer-term under-investment in digital infrastructure, resources and digital skills and was compounded by (an) inconsistency in approach across the system, which for staff at times added up to the impression of making it up as you go along ”

This view was also reflected in a comment by a sector leader on how provider business processes had coped during lockdown, saying:

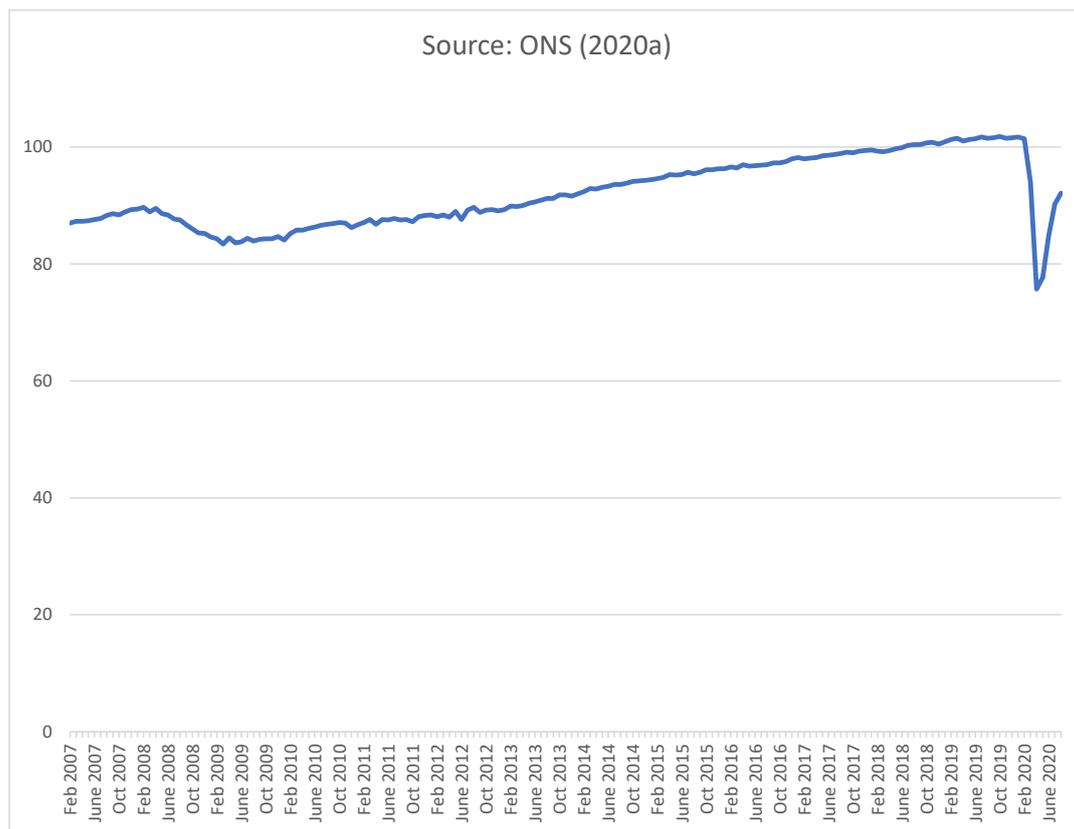


A decision was made by management a number of years ago to withdraw any IT support or renew equipment and it has made the job in hand at the moment very challenging ”

(Warner, 2020).

The economic impact of the lockdown was a primary and immediate concern for all in the sector and of course well beyond, with GDP having shrunk by 20.4% in the second quarter.

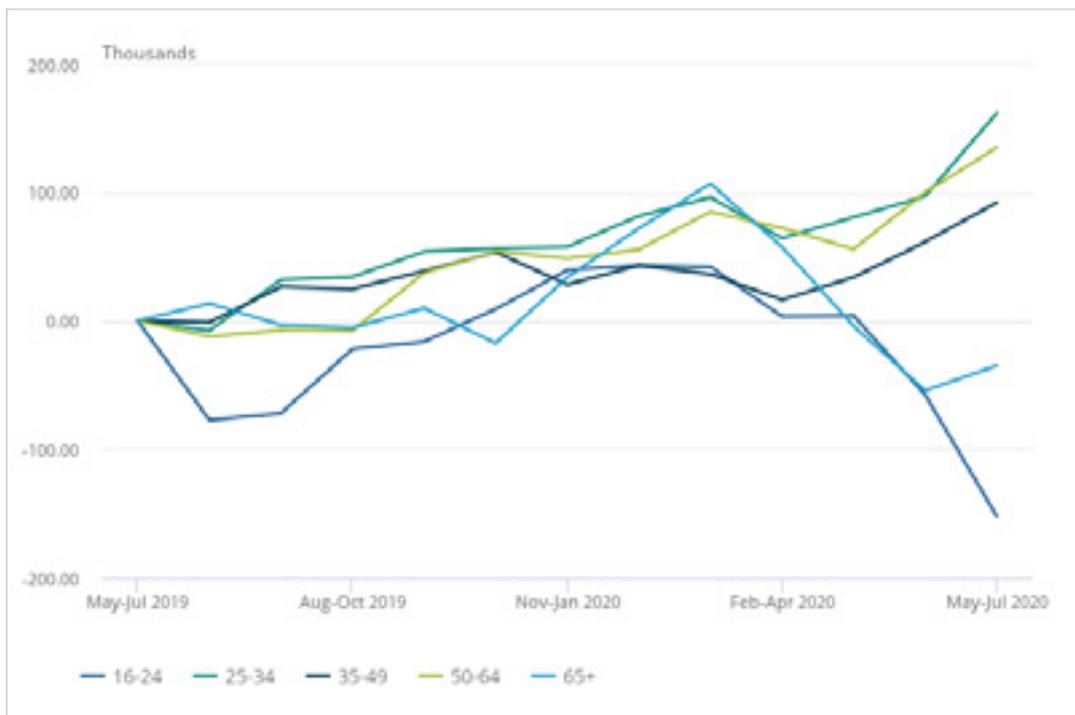
UK GDP



Source: (ONS, 2020a)

Although there was a small recovery in GDP as lockdown restrictions began to ease, many of the full effects were inevitably only going to be seen in the longer term, with a significant increase in youth unemployment becoming evident in the surge in unemployment amongst 16-24 year olds in the September 2020 figures.

Change in employment numbers by age group



Source: (ONS, 2020b)

After what some felt was a slow start at the beginning of the outbreak to appreciate its potential seriousness, the government's response to support business and the economy in the first days of lockdown had been sweeping, substantial and relatively comprehensive. On the 20th March Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced that government would support 80% of wages for individuals placed on furlough in order to protect against mass redundancies, which was launched as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme in April. (UK Government, 2020g). A Self-Employment Income Support Scheme also offered some support to the self-employed (UK Government, 2020h).

Of specific interest to the post-16 sector was however Procurement Policy Note 02/20 from the Cabinet Office, published on the 20th March (UK Government, 2020i). This set out that public "contracting authorities must act now to ensure suppliers at risk are in a position to resume normal contract delivery once the outbreak is over" by "urgently review(ing) their contract portfolio and inform(ing) suppliers they believe are at risk that they will continue to be paid as normal even if service delivery is disrupted or temporarily suspended) until at least the end of June".

Combined with the Chancellor’s announcement on the 16th April that “I want to ensure that no viable business slips through our safety net of support as we help protect jobs and the economy”, this on the surface appeared to be the welcome news that providers accessing public funds for work-based or work-related vocational learners would continue to receive their payments even if the learners had been furloughed or were otherwise unable to continue (even temporarily) with their studies.

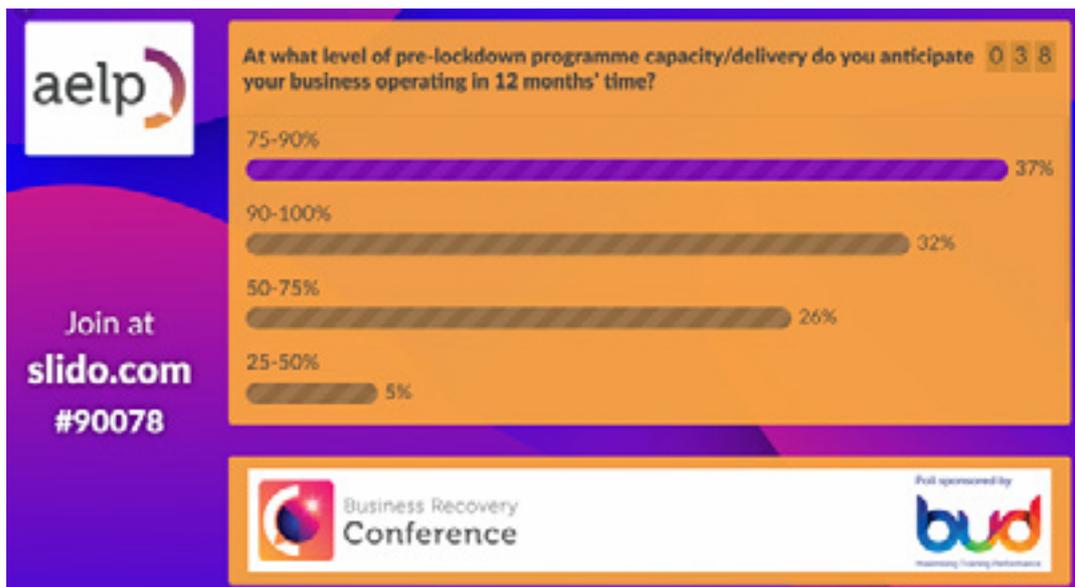
However, it soon became evident that the relief scheme was not intended to cover payments from the apprenticeship levy, which the DfE considered to be a contract between the employer and the provider, and not with the government. This provoked a furious reaction from trade bodies and providers alike, who had not long previously been lauded for their compliance with exhortations from government to shift their business to levy-funded apprenticeships, only to find that having done so they would now get no help where others who had not made these moves, would. With apprentices amongst the first to be furloughed or made redundant, the prospects for these providers seemed bleak.

There was also confusion for some time about whether or not furloughed apprentices could continue to be trained or not, despite providers pointing out that furlough presented a strong opportunity to maintain learning engagement and would maintain an income for them at no unplanned cost. When this was finally clarified (after threats of legal action and strident demands from the sector) it at least facilitated some short-term prospects of survival, though the longer-term still presented a problem – as some of these apprentices continued their studies to completion, they stopped generating an income and with starts down to something like 25% of their normal rate for this time of year, there was no new business coming in to generate a continuing source of income.

DfE and its agencies also undertook relatively rapid variations to delivery rules to facilitate continuing learning delivery amidst the national restrictions on travel and social distancing requirements of lockdown. The ESFA offered

early provisions on the 23rd March (the day lockdown was announced) that relaxed some requirements for training and assessment (IfATE, 2020), with Ofsted having suspended all routine assessments a few days earlier. Fuller guidance came from DfE with an announcement of the suspension of performance-based data for 2020 on the 8th April (UK Government, 2020) and the cancellation of “all but the most essential data collections” for educational and care settings on the 22nd (ESFA, 2020).

It is notable then that repeated surveys of the provider base as the summer ended revealed some evidence of very cautious optimism about their prospects going forward. Whilst just over 38% of AELP respondents (2020) were confident they could regain previous levels of business in the following six months – not at all unsatisfactory in light of the turmoil many had just been through - this figure rose significantly to over 60% when they were asked for their confidence in a longer than 6 month period. This was backed by a delegate poll at AELP’s online Business Recovery Conference on September 10th at which delegates were asked, “At what level of pre-lockdown programme capacity/delivery do you anticipate your business operating in 12 months’ time?”; 69% of respondents replied that they could return to at least three-quarters of previous levels of business, and 32% felt confident enough to predict 90-100%. It seemed that there was a feeling that if providers could just survive the titanic pressures of lockdown, there was enough resilience in the economy and amongst employers to see a recovery take place over the medium to longer term.

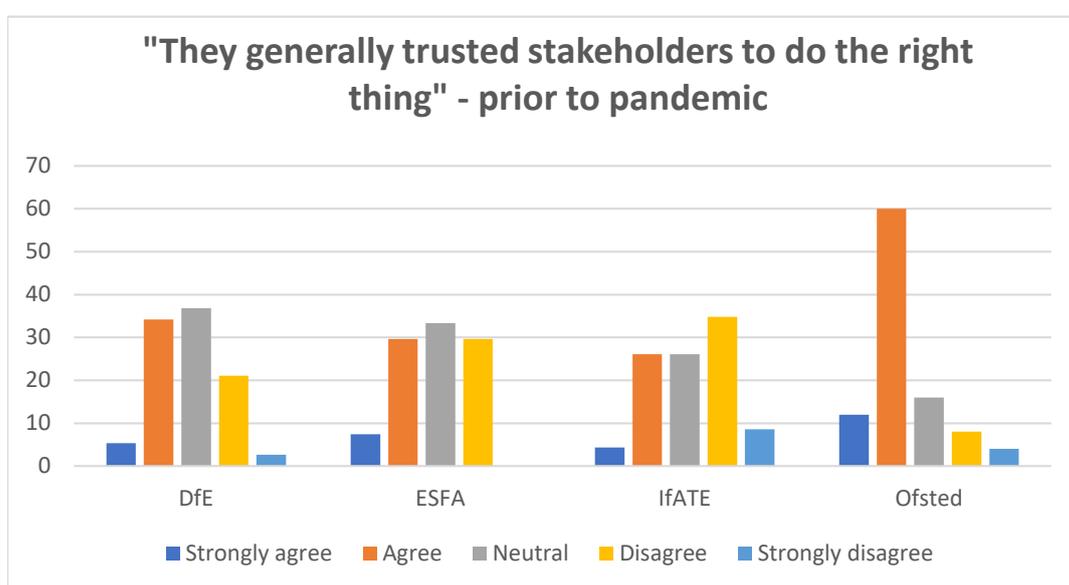


Source: (AELP)

This then is the backdrop that informs the view of sector leaders as to how the various government departments and agencies performed during the pandemic – whether they felt the actions taken were sufficient and timely enough to allow them to ride out the crashing waves of lockdown, or whether there had been deficiencies in what was undertaken and when. We now move on to discuss the specific performance of the four major government bodies – what their relationship with the sector was like prior to the pandemic; during it; and how they were perceived afterwards.

4. POST-16 SECTOR AUTHORITIES - SOME COMPARISONS

In this section we look at the results of our survey to elicit direct comparisons between the various government bodies to better understand the sector's overall viewpoint. In September 2020 AELP published a survey to which 53 sector leaders from (mostly) independent training providers responded. A number of these were subsequently spoken to in order to clarify or amplify their responses.

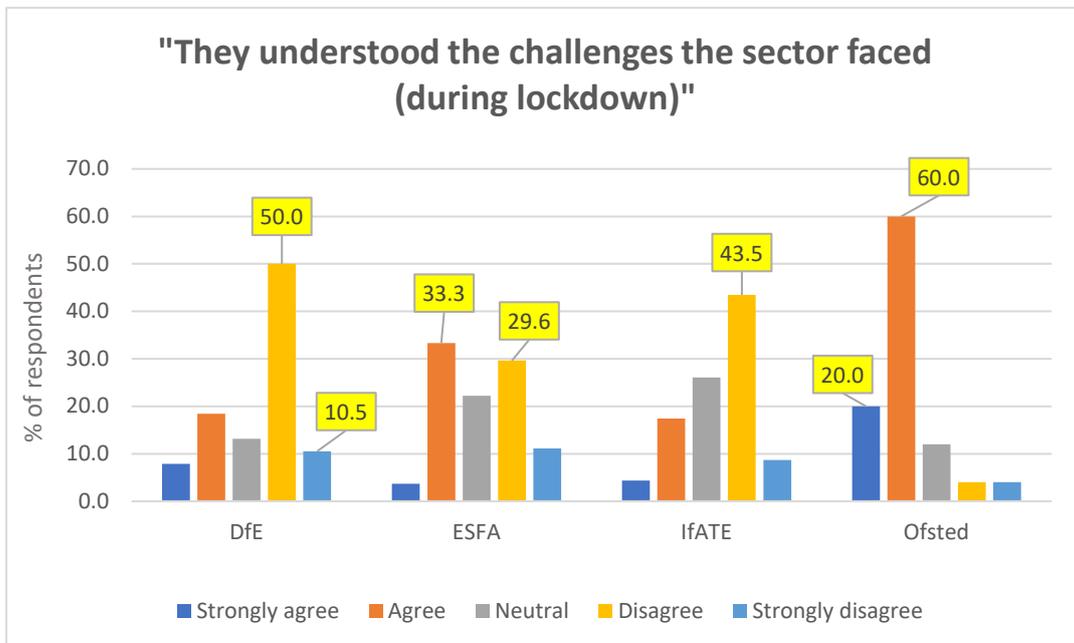


Agreement with this statement for DfE, ESFA and IfATE were broadly of the same magnitude (26% to 34%) but it is striking how much more positive the view of Ofsted was in this regard amongst sector leaders. On balance, of all four organisations IfATE scored the worse with over 43% disagreeing with the proposition.



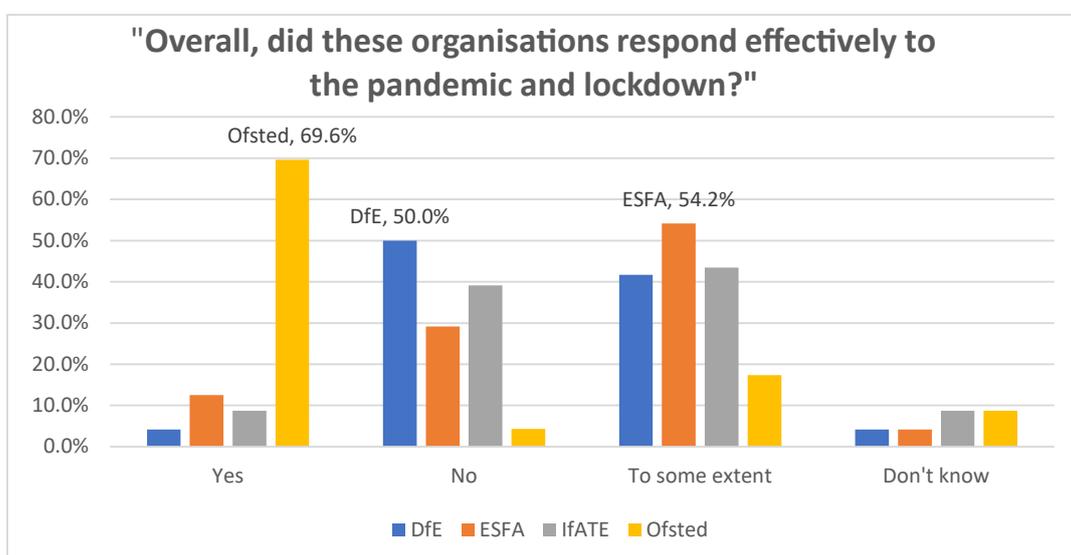
When asked about the prospects of trust of stakeholders in future, Ofsted once again scored highly with 72% once again agreeing but more of these now in the “Strongly agreeing” category. However, the proportions of those agreeing with the statement for the other three organisations all fell.

Another key point of comparison is the understanding that the various bodies were felt to have of the challenges faced by the sector during lockdown:



The picture as a whole tends to suggest however that the sector did not feel that during the period of lockdown that government in general really understood the situation in which the sector found itself. Over 60% felt that DfE lacked that understanding with ESFA not far behind in this respect. Respondents were more split on the ESFA however with very similar levels of agreement and disagreement.

That said, the level of understanding that the sector felt Ofsted had is remarkable, with 80% agreeing with the proposition, which may go some way to explaining the overall view of whether or not each organisation had what might be termed “a good pandemic”.



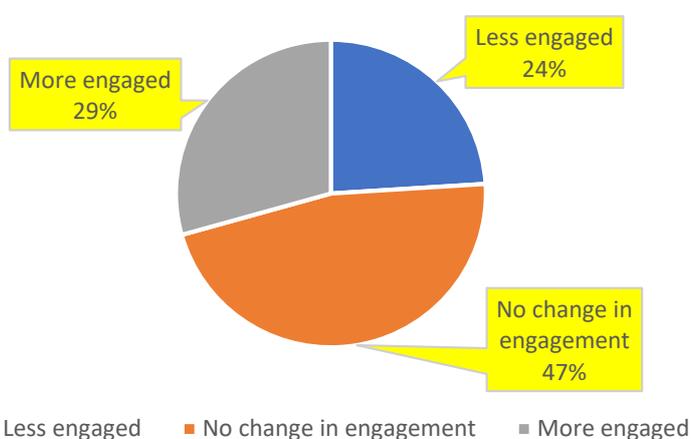
A comparison across all three organisations therefore brings all responses and comments into sharp relief: Ofsted were overwhelmingly felt by our respondents to have responded effectively to the Covid emergency, probably through having an understanding of the sector that DfE and the others appeared to lack.

5. HOW THE SECTOR SAW ITSELF DURING LOCKDOWN

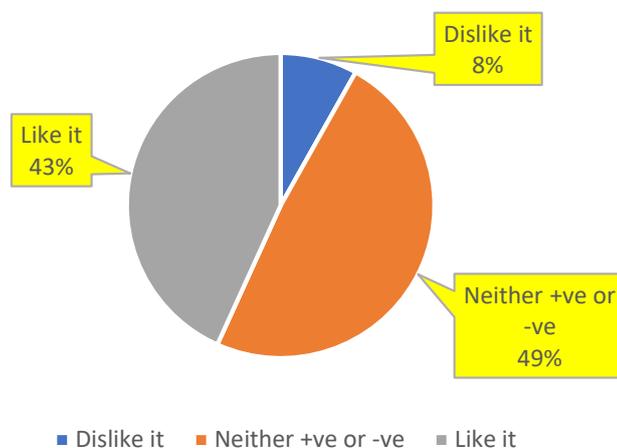
Respondents to our survey indicated that broadly they felt they had done the right things at the right time despite the effect (to one extent or another) of the actions or omissions of the various sector authorities.

A major outcome from lockdown was the shifting of learning delivery operations almost entirely online at incredible speed. Even as early as April 2020, Pember and Corney (2020) wrote that “after years of trying to nudge educators into using technology, a gargantuan shift has been achieved in just three weeks.” So far at least, the sector appears to have achieved this with no apparent serious adverse impact on the morale of their staff or learners, as evidenced by AELP/Bud (2020):

Learner response to remote delivery

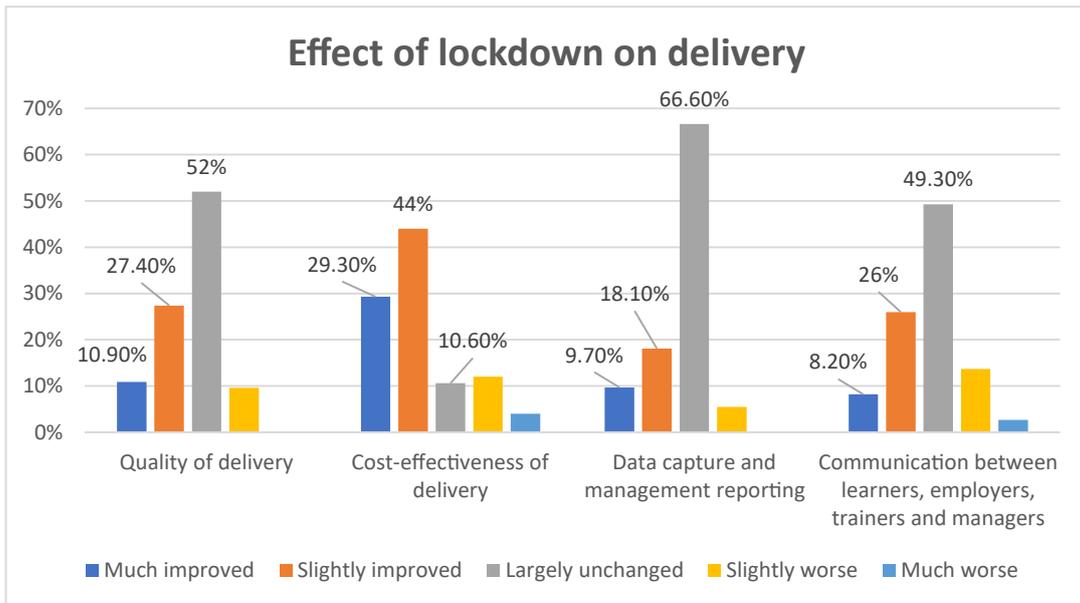


Staff response to remote working / delivery



Source: AELP/Bud (2020)

The same survey even found that many organisations could identify clear benefits on their operational effectiveness that had stemmed from the actions they had to take during lockdown:



Operationally therefore – and with the strong caveat of an assumption that sector organisations had been able to financially survive lockdown – the sector managed a period of huge change well. This happened, as we have seen, against a background of what was generally perceived by them to be a rather slow response from the sector authorities (with the notable exception of Ofsted), despite which the sector still seemed to have made the right decisions for itself, taken the right actions, and as a result crucially maintained and even improved provision in the eyes of both their staff and their learners.

Certainly, the survey conducted for this report showed respondents to be generally satisfied with their own performance, and that of their staff:



Key to where the sector is now therefore is not to lose this insight – if lockdown highlighted existing weaknesses in staff for 61% of respondents, what actions will it now take to remediate those weaknesses? If lockdown posed new and unexpected leadership challenges, what were they – how did we react to them – and what actions are being taken to ensure that should they happen again, others can learn from those experiences and they are not just lost to memory?

One strong theme that clearly emerges from not just this study but others, is that the great acceleration of the move to online vocational learning is likely to be a major legacy of the experience for the sector as a whole. Clearly this move was already happening, but a number of respondents to our survey made clear that the pandemic had nevertheless highlighted in one way or another how relatively ill-prepared they were, when previously they thought they had been adapting to the new online world in a progressive and satisfactory way. When asked, “Knowing what you know now, what if anything would you have done differently (during lockdown)?” the answers were almost exclusively about preparation for a shift to online learning: for example

“

Have more knowledge about what learners are able to access from home-laptops, PCs, internet issues ”

“

Prepared staff for remote delivery by accessing external training for them on digital learning. ”

“

Ensure that all staff and learners had suitable internet and IT equipment Researched more free online courses. Delivered training on google teams/skype, ensure all staff have good IT skills ”

None of them indicated that there was anything they felt they could have done differently about how they handled their relationships with government and its agencies, but many commented on the fact that the experience had

exposed the gap between their own reality of the sector and how it appeared to have been perceived by the authorities:

“

what is clear is that in my opinion most are so far away from what is happening in the market that changes are needed ”

“

they have very little understanding of hands on education and training and draw from experiences of their own academic education that do not reflect the apprenticeship or vocational sector ”

At the same time, there was a clear feeling that the only way things would get better was by working together:

“

Happy to talk, be consulted, have off-the-record discussions to help improve understanding. ”

“

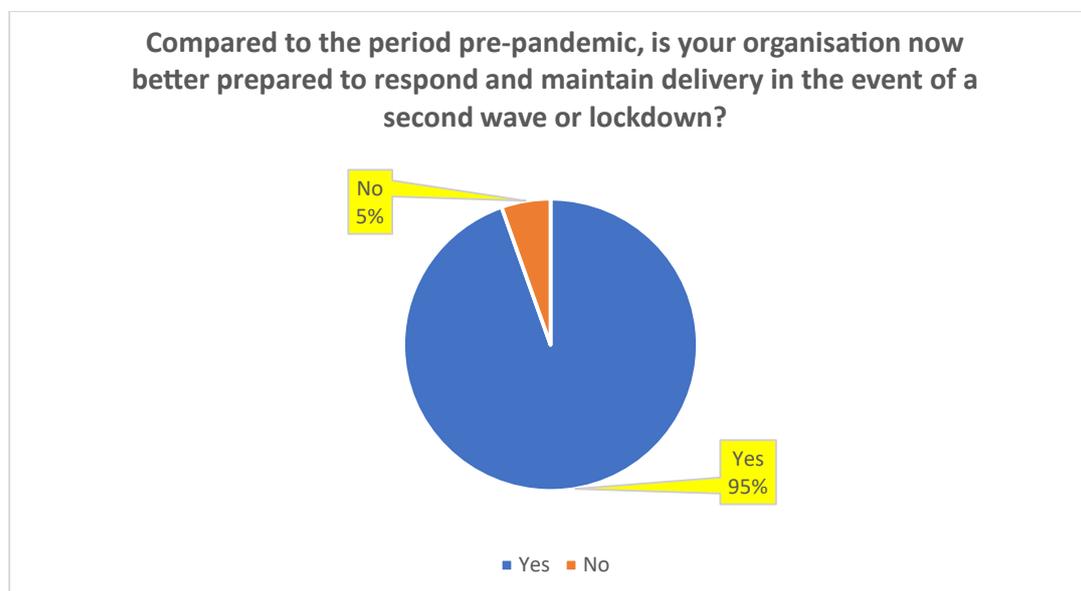
We will continue to fully interact as we did prior to lockdown and hope the interaction is reciprocated ”

In some ways it is of course to be expected that respondents might err to the positive in making judgements on their own performance, so we are not claiming these results to be the definitive or authoritative view of how things actually were. They do however give a good insight into the way that sector leaders thought and reacted, and given the inescapable evidence of a positive shift to online learning, of an improvement in some aspects of business operation, and of the mere fact that the majority of such businesses survived what may be accurately described as a catastrophic drop in national economic productivity, there is reason to think that at least the essence of their responses has some verity about it.

6. AFTER THE FIRST WAVE ...

Earlier we looked at the issues that were at the top of the sector's mind before lockdown started. As 2020 began there were some technical and sector-specific issues such as the finances of the college sector, but in general FE as a whole was still digesting and ruminating on how the new Conservative government may treat it, picking apart the 2019 manifesto and cross-referencing it to announcements from the new Cabinet. Then almost overnight, the old order was effectively torn up and replaced by a deck of almost entirely new questions that had to be answered immediately in the context of an unprecedented national emergency.

The sector responded well however; it is already being used as an exemplar to the schools and higher education sectors as to how best education can respond and prepare to events of this nature in future. That is a function of, and derives from, effective leadership. In this respect it is therefore useful to note another finding from the AELP/Bud survey (2020):



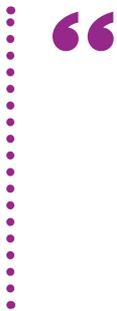
What comes over from the data in this piece of work is that respondents felt that they had moved a long way from where they started, and that if it happened again they would be much better placed to react and continue to provide learning services with minimal disruption. One sector leader was

quoted as saying “having developed protocols and capability we could now switch within a working week to fully support learners if we were required to close the facility”.

One area of further learning that needs to be addressed (that it has to be said did not particularly present itself in the survey conducted from this report, but is evident from conversation and the experience of AELP in talking to its members) is the issue of mental health of staff and learners alike. The concept of mental health issues has of course long been recognised as force acting on the capacity of a learner to engage in learning, but the experience of lockdown and the containment of individuals in sometimes chaotic home settings in particular has manifested itself in a much-enhanced awareness of the effect of this on their whole ability to learn and train. Lockdown appears to have conjoined the issues of mental health and learning ability much more closely in the minds of some sector leaders than was the case beforehand when they were sometimes treated as overlapping but largely “separate” issues.

To expand on this, contracting a medical ailment like a cold or flu may stop someone from learning for a short while as they take to their bed, but eventually they would resume from the point they left off, and it seems that mental health was often regarded in much the same sort of way. It seems that lockdown has altered this somewhat – that mental health is increasingly being seen as potentially altering the whole ability of someone to learn, and to recall what they have previously learnt. That is therefore of fundamental interest to the sector, and leaders need to therefore be much more aware of this subject and how it can impact on the delivery of their products and services in future.

In general, the experience of lockdown and how the sector reacted to it tends to reflect well on the innate “leaderhood” of the sector’s supply side – what Silver (2020b) has described as



a kind of far-sighted sensitivity to the here-and-now challenges faced by your community that transcends the task-oriented activity ... (and) conveys a deep sense both of relatedness and of open-ended, future-focused concern.”

What is less clear is whether this leaderhood stemmed from a deliberate sense of purpose – that the decisions were being made with a clear line of sight to the future and of the welfare of the community as a whole, or whether the effect was almost an incidental (perhaps even accidental) derivative of the circumstances in which everyone found themselves, on the basis of decisions that virtually made themselves. In speaking to sector leaders, it does seem anecdotally that many put themselves under immense pressure not just to make the right decisions in the moment, but with an eye to how those decisions would play out in future. Others however expressed the view that the need (for example) to move to online learning was obvious, immediate and unavoidable, and therefore even if it had been contrary to long-term interests they may well have been forced to make the same decisions anyway.

Either interpretation is in a way positive. One way or the other, leaderhood was felt to have manifested itself when the need for it was at its greatest – in one sense through positive, deliberate, considered rounded and decisive leadership, and through the other incidentally, by leaders not standing in the way of what needed to be done in the best interests of learners and the community as a whole, just for the sake of having done so.

Either way, what the pandemic appears to have done is to have manifested and/or articulated a clear sense of what leaderhood is beyond the abstract concept of it. By giving it form in this way, the sector may be better able to

examine it more closely and see how it can be applied and improved in future - what remains to be seen is whether they will do so, or whether the various winds of everyday business and political change somehow prevent this from being undertaken in the depth it perhaps deserves.

Leadership cannot however be a one-way street, with lots of it on one side of a relationship but none on the other. If it is called for anywhere, it must surely be called for within the fabric of the civil service; that body of people charged with devising and implementing structures of British life that, even if they do not sustain for decades in their own right, will have resonance down the ages long after their own times. What would now be interesting to look at to what extent this demonstration of leadership within the supply side is reciprocated within government and its agencies. We do not really know how corresponding individuals within the civil service perceived the actions or the responses of the sector to the communications, instructions, guidance and regulation they were putting out; nor what they hoped, planned or felt would be the outcomes of those; nor whether they were pleased, disappointed or ambivalent about how those communications were met and/or implemented. Until we know that, and until we have a clear picture of to what extent, if at all, those organisations and the people within them react to the lessons they learnt about their own leadership, it will be difficult to form a complete view of how the experience of lockdown will have changed things, if at all.

7. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF LOCKDOWN?

In our introduction, we posed four questions we wanted to examine further with reference to our survey, of talking to sector leaders, and of reading the various announcements and commentaries that made their way into the public arena over the period of lockdown and afterwards.

1

Did the experience change the nature of the relationship between the government, its agencies, and the sector?

The answer here appears to be “not fundamentally”. Ofsted clearly rate very well amongst the sector and they did so before, during and after lockdown, and there is no serious expectation that anything will change going forward (and certainly not for the worse). It appears that the pre-lockdown views of DfE, IfATE and ESFA were also not significantly impacted. Sector leaders seemed to hold the view that each organisation behaved more or less as they might be expected to, with no damascene conversion of enhanced collaboration and trust suddenly becoming evident as a result of the emergency circumstances.

This is a little unfortunate, because the need for unity across the country, let alone the sector, was key to seeing the period of lockdown through. It is generally understood that crises can catalyse significant change and there was some hope amongst leaders that perhaps the need to allow the sector to make its own decisions and take its own actions – and the fact that it did so largely very effectively – might have a beneficial effect on how the sector is regulated and managed in future. Indeed, if we are to be very honest, it may have been what we were hoping to see some evidence of in the responses we received, and in posing the questions in the first place. It may yet be the case of course – there seems to be a long way to go before the pandemic plays out - but if so, it does not seem that sector leaders are currently particularly confident that it will indeed happen.

2

Did the government's response – or lack of it – affect how their authority is viewed in a post-corona world?

Broadly government and regulators reacted and behaved more or less how everyone expected them to react and behave. This does reflect some inherent stability in the system - even if it is not the sort of stability that is in all cases welcomed, there is something to be said in times of emergency for institutions to live up to expectations.

Ofsted's performance during the pandemic is an extreme example of this. Whilst they lived up to expectations, it was slightly surprising to see such an overwhelmingly positive reaction from respondents. This could of course have been because the suspension of inspections gave everyone one less and very major thing to worry about in the course of lockdown, for which sector leaders were suitably grateful. It does however appear to constitute more than that – the view of Ofsted was positive even before lockdown and they consolidated that further. The default reaction to being inspected may be one of apprehension, but sector leaders were clear to us that the contribution Ofsted make, how they go about their tasks, how they undertake their duties, is actually appreciated and serves overall to make learning provider businesses better. It was felt that inspectors already understood the challenges that the sector faced (probably because so many of them come from a practitioner background themselves) and that this translated effectively into how the organisation responded in the midst of the crisis. With this in mind, it becomes even more noticeable that respondent comments on the other organisations often tended to refer to their distance from ground-level reality. It is difficult therefore to get a sense of leadership - the sense of decisions being taken with eyes on both the community context and the future – from organisations that are perceived as not really understanding the present context of the sectors they are being given responsibility for, let alone how it may play out going forward.

There is a different, and political, aspect to this question of the effect of the lockdown on government authority that we did not explore in this report but may yet have a bearing on how the crisis affects the sector going forward - to what extent did the political leadership of the country who sit in authority above these departments affect their own standing? That is a much broader question of course – one that will play out in a much longer timescale and will ultimately probably only be fully answered in the heat of a general election.

3

What implications might the sudden shift to widescale online learning and remote working have to the way further education is thought about and delivered once the emergency abates?

A clear theme that emerged here was that many in the sector found that they were not as far down the path of being ready for online and distance learning as they had thought; or at least, that there was further to go to make it a viable working proposition than they had appreciated. Plans for implementing remote learning were brought forward at an incredibly fast rate because there was no choice except to do so. Some sector leaders seemed to express mild surprise at the organisational benefits that rapidly accrued from this, with some admitting they had not really given enough thought previously to the subject, and leading them to ask (or even berate) themselves as to why this was the case.

There are clearly a good deal of issues still to overcome – whilst remote learning can bring about cost-savings in travel and efficiency of performance by potentially allowing for greater caseloads, this has to be offset by the fact that many learners – and in particular those with learning difficulties or special needs – miss the interaction of personal contact in learning exchanges, and this is very difficult to replicate in an online forum. Practical training is also an obstacle, and much thought needs to be given to how this can be best accommodated – the rise of augmented reality for example may have a part to play in this respect.

A number of respondents we talked to however noted approvingly of the opportunities that the move to online learning had brought about, and whilst relatively few indicated that going forward their offer would remain primarily virtual, almost all indicated that to one extent or another blended learning would play a much greater part than before because it was clear that the choice of learning styles and learning delivery it opens up is appreciated by both learners and staff alike.

That being the case, there is a clear need for the authorities to take this into account as they think forward about how the sector develops in the years to come. Paper-based and purely exam-based learning methodologies are unlikely to serve the learning population well having been through the experience they have just been through, nor are they likely to remain acceptable to a cohort of young people whose prospects were disrupted by a somewhat ham-fisted attempt to simulate the results of exams that never took place. A movement towards higher proportions of coursework, remote invigilation, or centre-assessed grades will all require a greater sense of trust being engendered between the authorities and the sector. The sector clearly feel they have earned this, and that the authorities pay too much attention to the few bad apples – referencing a provider who said that “rules are put in place to manage the 1% of providers who don’t do the right thing, not get the best out of the 99%” – but the authorities may counter that this is true for life as a whole. What leaders on both sides need to appreciate is the differing dynamics at play in the contexts of the decisions that are being made – the sector (and in particular independents) are trying to deliver effective training in the context of a fast-moving and volatile commercial market, whilst the government is trying do so using taxpayer’s money in the full glare of public opinion. There is a gap between these two contexts that was evident at the beginning of the crisis and remains evident now, but if the lockdown was to teach us all anything, it should have highlighted the need to close this gap and align the two dynamics as far as possible.

4

What thinking needs to be undertaken in terms of contingency planning against any future emergency of this nature?

In terms of operational planning, there does not appear to be a feeling that much worse could happen than that which dropped on the sector at end of March 2020 with the almost complete closure of the economy and effective house arrest of much of the population. The pressure to adapt and react to this at the time was immense but sector leaders feel that on the whole they did the right things, acknowledging the role of trade bodies in providing support, guidance and an articulation of their views and positions as they did so.

There is however work that needs to be undertaken more widely on implementing effective blended learning, as lockdown highlighted a number of shortcomings that leaders must continue to address if the sector is to get the best from this emerging technology, both on a “steady state” basis and in times of crisis such as that just experienced:

- » The unreadiness of some staff to work with the technology
- » The effect of a lack of personal human contact on motivation and engagement
- » The difficulty of replicating practical elements of learning on a remote basis
- » The extent of digital deficits amongst learners in terms of connectivity, hardware and software

Our study therefore leads us to draw the following conclusions:

- » The further education and skills sector was not as prepared for the shift to online learning as it had assumed it was
- » That nevertheless it took huge steps to mitigate and these deficiencies quickly and effectively wherever it could

- » That the relative lack of trust in the supply side that it felt had been demonstrated previously by most agencies of government threatened to – but ultimately did not – hold back the ability of the sector to make these changes
- » Some residual suspicion remains amongst sector leaders that however much they feel they have reacted well and learnt from the experience, this will not positively affect the way the sector is governed and regulated from above in the future.
- » In this respect, DfE and IfATE are felt to have much to learn from the actions and response of Ofsted – whilst ESFA appears to have been viewed as (to some extent) “apparatchiks”, functionaries of their political masters and therefore inevitably bound to reflect the weaknesses of their leadership.

This in turn leads us to some broad recommendations:

1

There is an opportunity for the sector to learn much more about itself by properly examining the application of leadership during lockdown – but for this to have benefits across the economy as a whole, government and the civil service must be prepared to do likewise. Both sides must be honest enough acknowledge any shortcomings they may identify as a result, and both sides must commit to acting to remedy these in a constructive and collaborative fashion.

2

Actions speak louder than words. There is little doubt that the sector and its leaders on the whole responded well to the lockdown, and this demonstration of ability, capacity and leadership should be reflected in a shift in the perception of the government and its regulators towards the sector. Whilst rules will always be to manage the 1% who do not do the right thing, there should be a better appreciation of the impact of these rules on the ability of the 99% who try to do so. It is that which appears to be missing in the current relationship between the sector and government, which should take much more active steps to better understand the challenges that the training infrastructure faces.

3

The role of mental health in learning and recall needs to be better understood by sector practitioners. There appears to be a greater acknowledgement of the evidence of a detrimental effect on learners more than was the case before lockdown, but some sector leaders are now beginning to see that it is not purely an outside force acting on the functioning of learning and recall. It can in fact be a much more fundamental component of an individual's ability to learn and recall at all.

4

Sector leaders have acknowledged the deficit in their own understanding of the challenges and benefits of introducing remote learning technologies. They have understood that they, their staff and their organisations were in many cases simply not at the level they had thought themselves to be at when the pandemic struck. On the basis that leaders have now been forced to see a rounded vision under duress of what technology can do, and that technological advance is not likely to go backwards, there is a strong need for the sector to move forward and embrace the challenge more fully by understanding the technology better, absorbing and utilising it in their delivery and ensuring that staff and learners alike have the basic tools to be able to make it work for them.

5

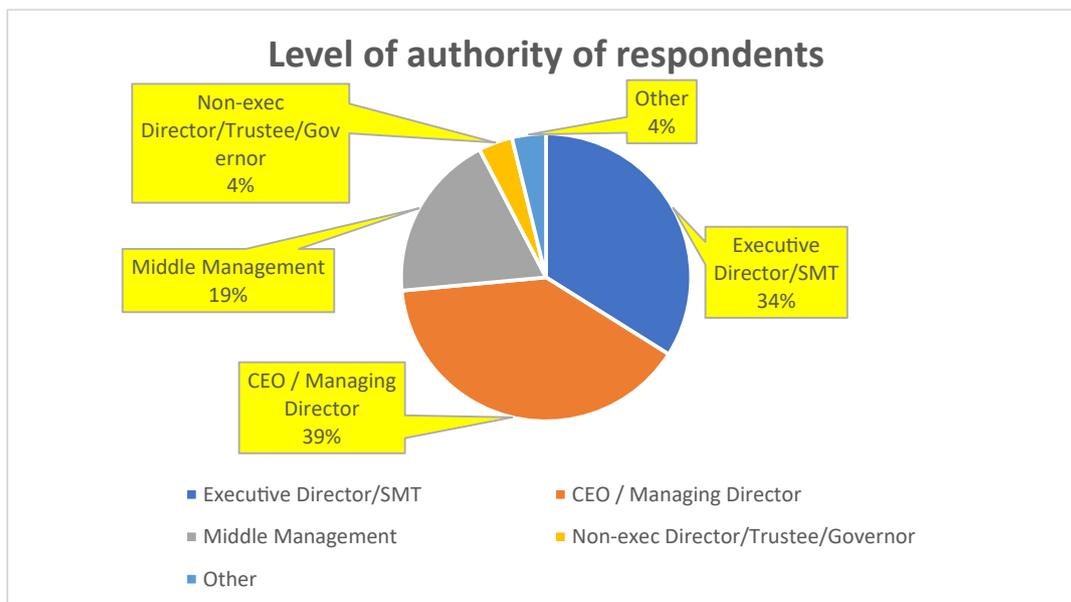
Government too must do more to recognise this truth and work with the sector to ensure that regulation and metrics of performance can make technological opportunities work to the best advantage of everybody.

Clearly the sector has learnt much since March 2020, and the learning is probably not over yet. Even as this is being written, large parts of England are bracing themselves for what amounts to a second full lockdown as the second wave of the pandemic threatens to break on our shores. Nevertheless, we have a chance now to assimilate a huge amount of learning from a short space of time, building it into the fabric of our businesses and their overall earning offer going forward. Not to do so would be a failure of leadership in itself.

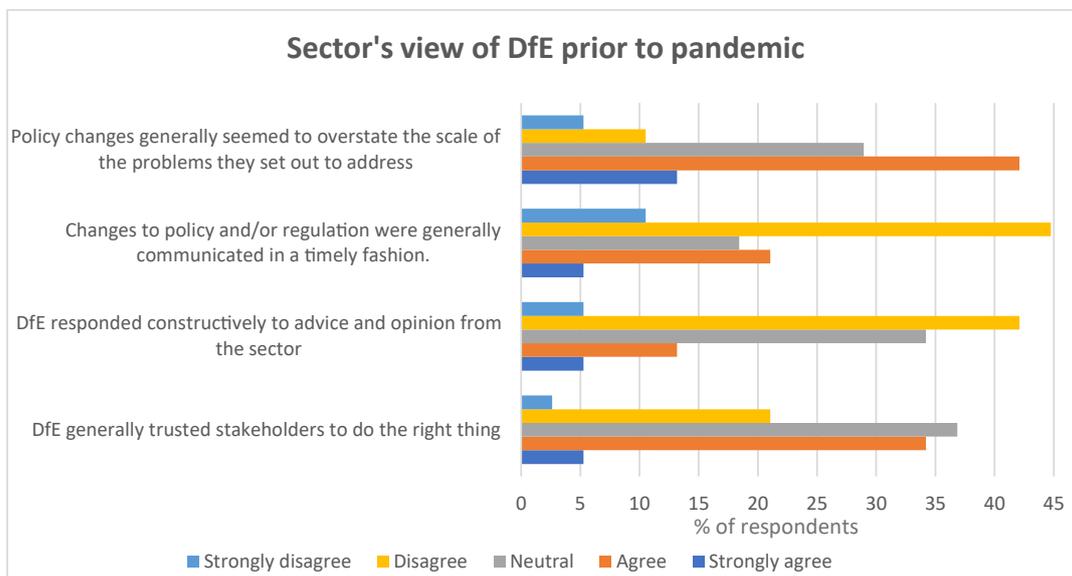
ANNEX 1: A SURVEY OF SECTOR LEADERS

In this we look at the results of our survey of sector leaders to look directly and in more detail at how they regarded the various departments and agencies of government before, during and after the period of lockdown.

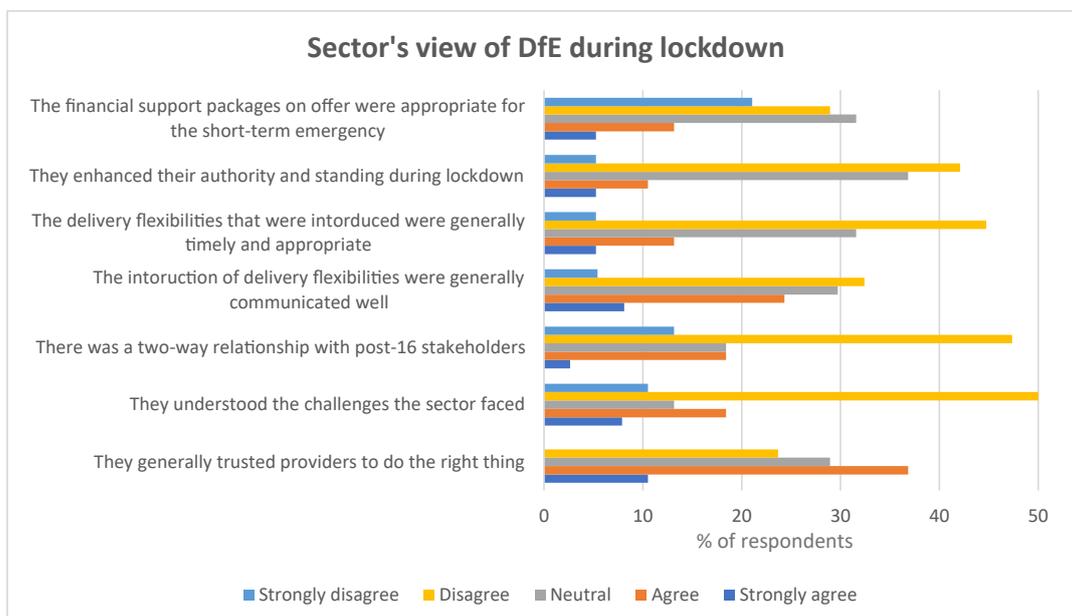
The survey was published on 4th September 2020 and was in field for three weeks. It generated a total of 53 responses overwhelmingly from Chief Executives, Managing Directors or Directors and Senior Management Team officials. Response came overwhelmingly from independent training providers.



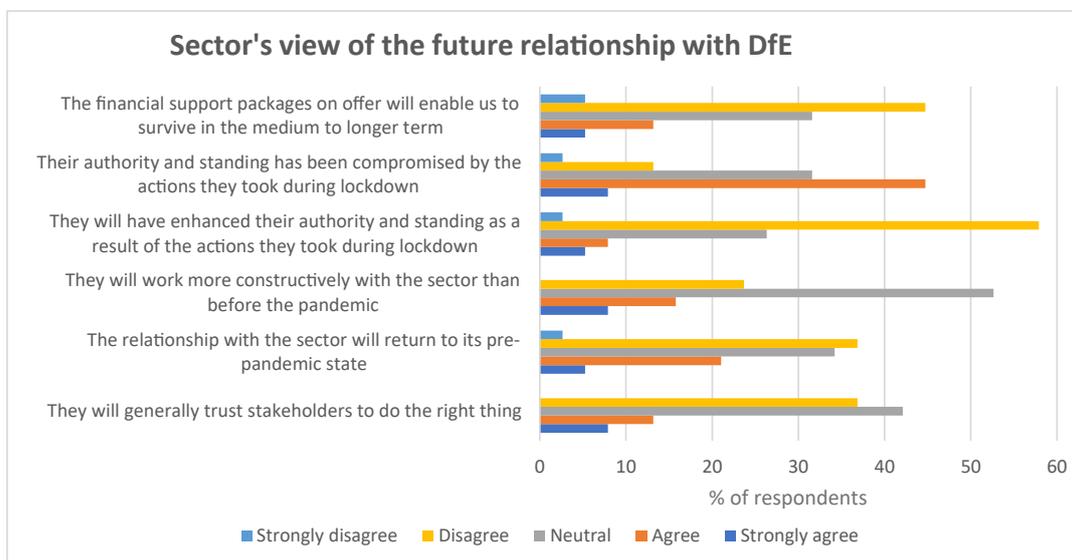
A. DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION (DFE)



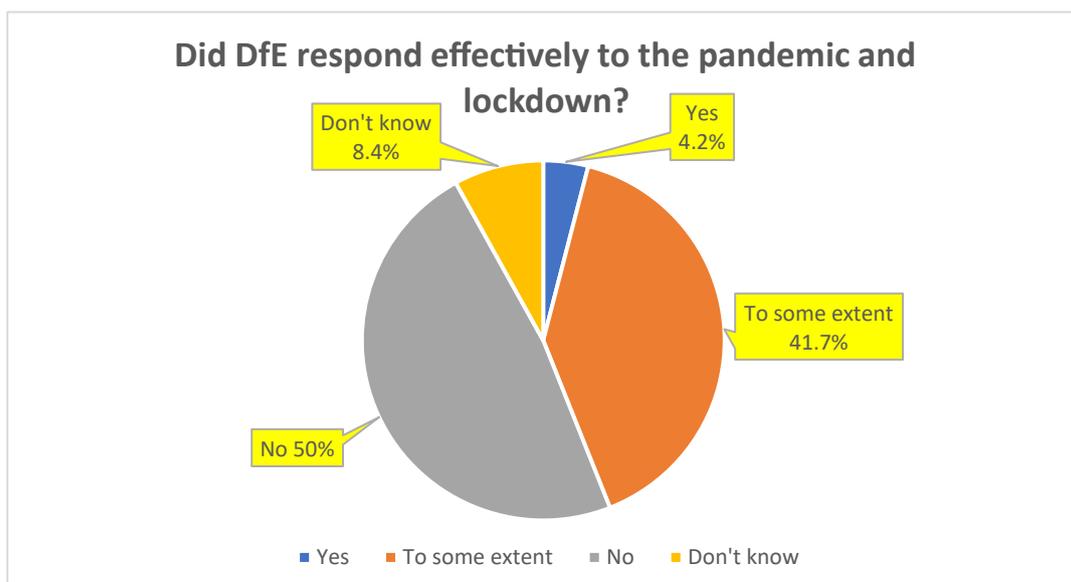
Prior to lockdown, respondents believed DfE to generally have had a reasonable degree of trust in stakeholders to “do the right thing”, with 37% ambivalent and 39% agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. However, it seems the way they went about their work did not sit so well – 47% disagreed that DfE responded constructively to the sector’s advice and opinions. Additionally, 55% disagreed that policy changes were generally communicated in a timely fashion, with the same proportion agreeing that changes generally seemed to overstate the scale of the problem.



These findings were exacerbated during lockdown itself – the sector’s feeling that DfE trusted them did rise slightly, but over 60% felt that they did not understand the challenges that providers now faced, with the same proportion disagreeing that there was a 2-way relationship with them. There were broadly similar proportions of respondents agreeing and disagreeing as to the efficacy of communications surrounding the flexibilities that were introduced, though half disagreed that the changes were timely or appropriate, or that the financial packages on offer were appropriate – probably a function of the high proportion of apprenticeship providers that responded to the survey and who had felt short-changed by the 02/20 document, but marked nonetheless.



Respondents were also asked to agree or disagree with statements regarding the future of the relationship between the sector and DfE. It was felt that the DfE would be slightly more distrustful of stakeholders going forward, with a good deal of mixed feelings about whether the relationship might revert to its pre-pandemic state – 52% were completely neutral for example on whether or not the DfE would be more constructive with them going forward. 59% disagreed that the DfE’s authority and standing had been enhanced by the actions they took during lockdown, and half disagreed that the financial support packages offered would be enough for them to survive in the medium to longer term.



We finally asked whether DfE had responded effectively to the pandemic and lockdown. Exactly half of respondents answered “No” although nearly 42% felt that they had to at least some extent. In the comments left by respondents the issue of trust played quite seriously – one said that “rules are put in place to manage the 1% of providers who don’t do the right thing, not get the best out of the 99%” whilst there were other criticisms of a “broad brush approach” and a disconnect with smaller and more local providers. One respondent did however comment that although DfE had initially relied too much on existing policies and flexibilities to manage the situation, there was “a very definite shift to a more responsive, helpful and realistic approach”.

The general lack of trust issue, and a perceived disconnect with the sector, was however reinforced by answers to the question “How (if at all) did the controversies surrounding exam results in August 2020 impact on the relationship between the sector and government and its agencies?” Whilst this situation was not entirely down to DfE, it was clear that the sector as a whole did hold them culpable to a large degree.

Comments included:

“

It confirmed to me that those in government have little idea of the real impact of their decision-making ”

“

They made a bad situation worse ”

“

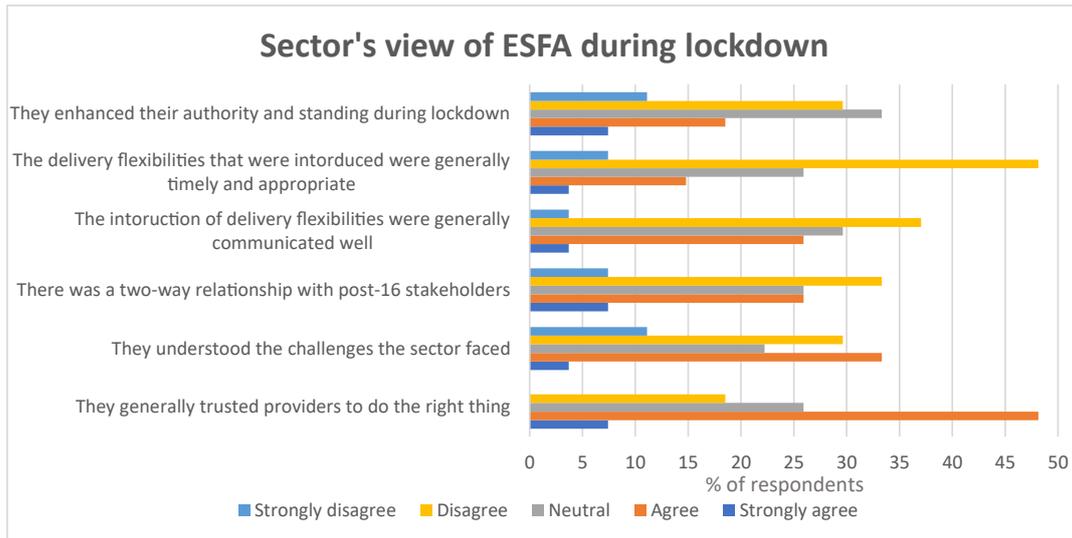
It made me wonder what they had got wrong if they got something as basic as this wrong ”

One commented that it had “left me with no faith in government”; another remarked on the “loss of faith in the qualifications side of apprenticeship standards” with another also remarking on the “tremendous harm and loss of confidence (which will have) long-term repercussions. Even now, employers are saying they don’t trust the outcome when they are looking to recruit apprentices.”

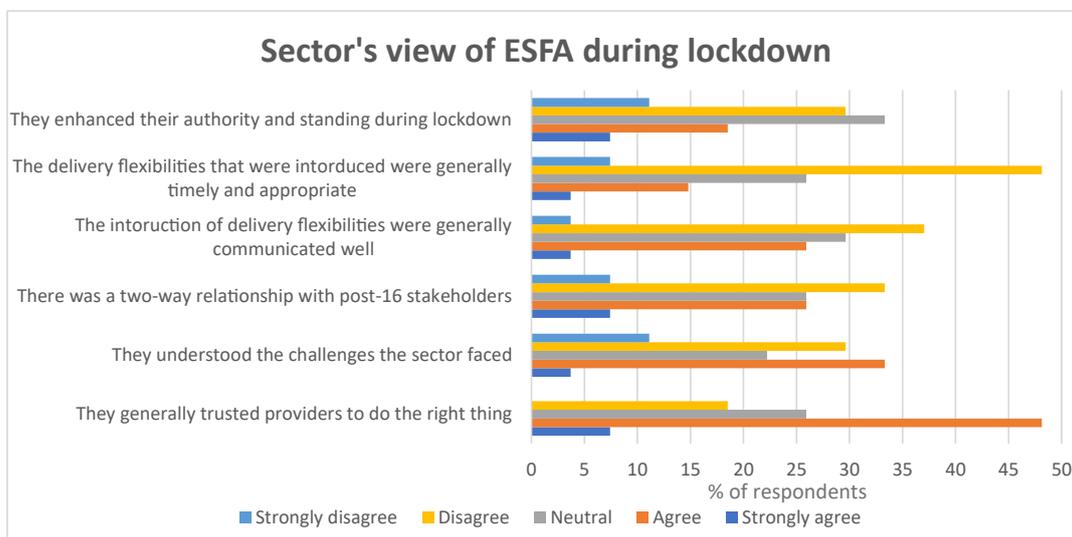
In all, DfE were not considered to have been particularly effective during the period of lockdown. Their authority and standing, already questioned by providers who felt they were not trusted and did not have a particularly constructive relationship with them, took a further knock and there is clearly little confidence that things will improve going forward.

B. EDUCATION AND SKILLS FUNDING AGENCY (ESFA)

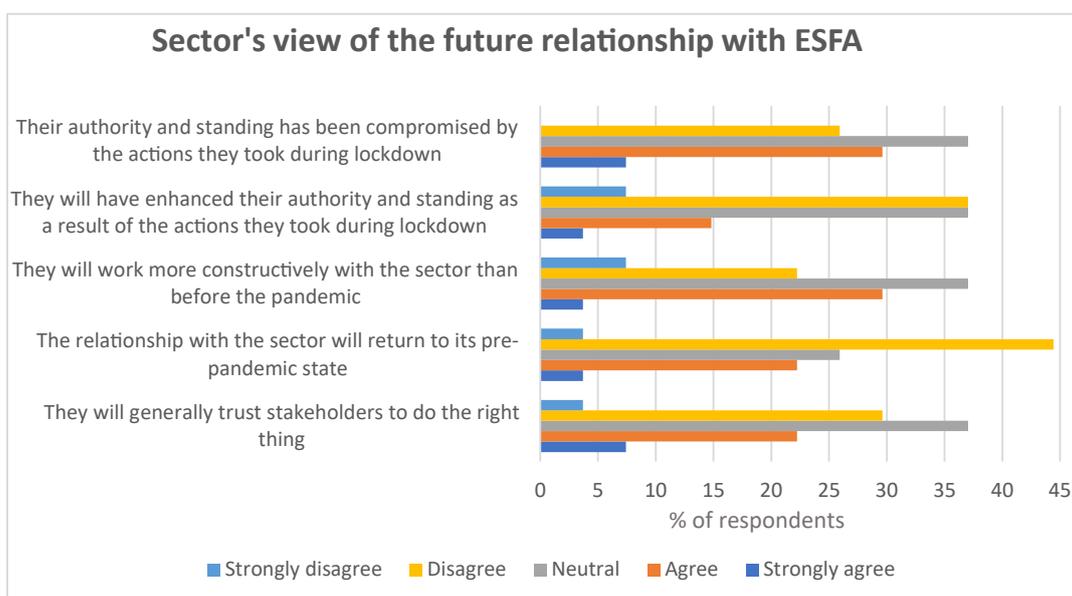
According to our respondents, the sector felt a little more comfortable with some aspects of the ESFA both before and during the lockdown.



When these results are compared to those for DfE, it is found that although ESFA were perceived prior to lockdown to trust providers even less than DfE, they did feel the ESFA were slightly more constructive than DfE, and slightly better at communicating in a timely fashion (though 44% still saw this as an issue). Once again ESFA policy changes were felt by 48% to overstate the nature of the problems they set out to address. This correlates with the results for DfE and is likely to stem from the fact that ESFA do not change policy themselves but enact instructions from DfE.



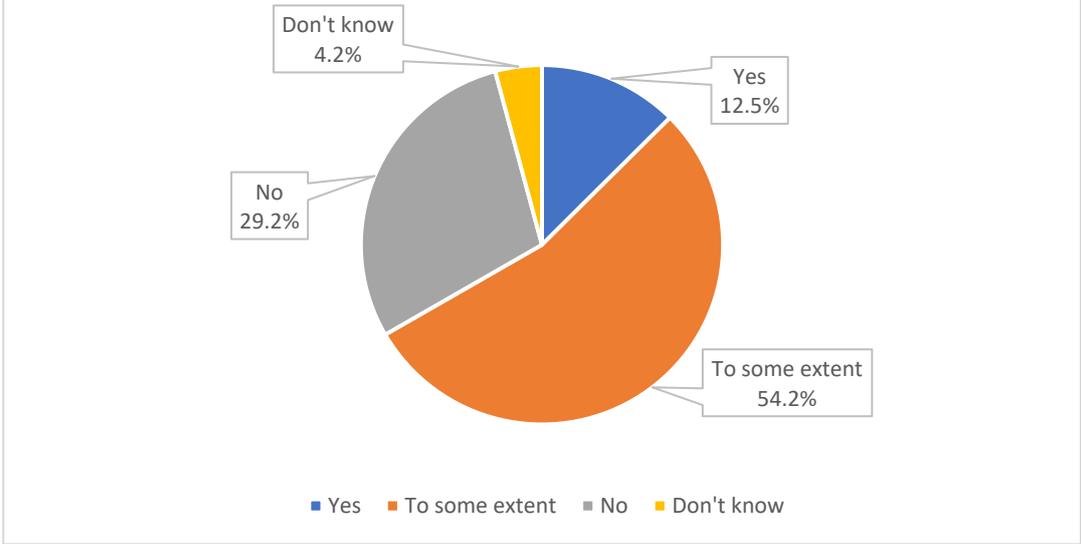
Trust figures in ESFA did rise during the period of lockdown, and though 40% felt they did not understand provider challenges, this was better than DfE's result. Respondents were fairly evenly split on agreeing with the statement about a 2-way relationship with stakeholders. The flexibilities that were introduced were on balance not felt to have been communicated well (although there were low levels of strong agreement/strong disagreement on this question) but 55% did not think they were timely or appropriate. Overall, 40% thought the ESFA had enhanced its authority and standing during lockdown, which is of the same magnitude as those responding to the same question about DfE.



Going forward there is no significant change anticipated by respondents in the relationship with ESFA as a result of lockdown. 47% felt that the relationship would return to its prior status, though 33% thought that ESFA will become more constructive. Overall, the ESFA's standing seems to have balanced out as unaffected, with strong neutral scores on each statement of around 37%.

It would appear that on balance, respondents felt that ESFA were basically doing what they were told to do by DfE, and largely reacted accordingly. The broad correlation with DfE results for the same questions tends to indicate that if there were delays or confusion about communication, this was as much down to the DfE instructions as it was to the ESFA's ability to manage and implement them.

Did ESFA respond effectively to the pandemic and lockdown?



On balance, it seems that respondents were slightly more impressed with the ESFA’s response to the lockdown than they were with DfE. Nearly two-thirds thought they were effective to at least some extent with only 29% actively saying that they thought they had been ineffective.

There was however a strong theme in the comments made about a slowness of response from ESFA, specifically to individual queries from stakeholders:

“*responses ... can take considerable time ... contradictory answers also demonstrate a lack of understanding of what the issue is*”

“*slow to respond to anything with no-one able to answer or give a decision*”

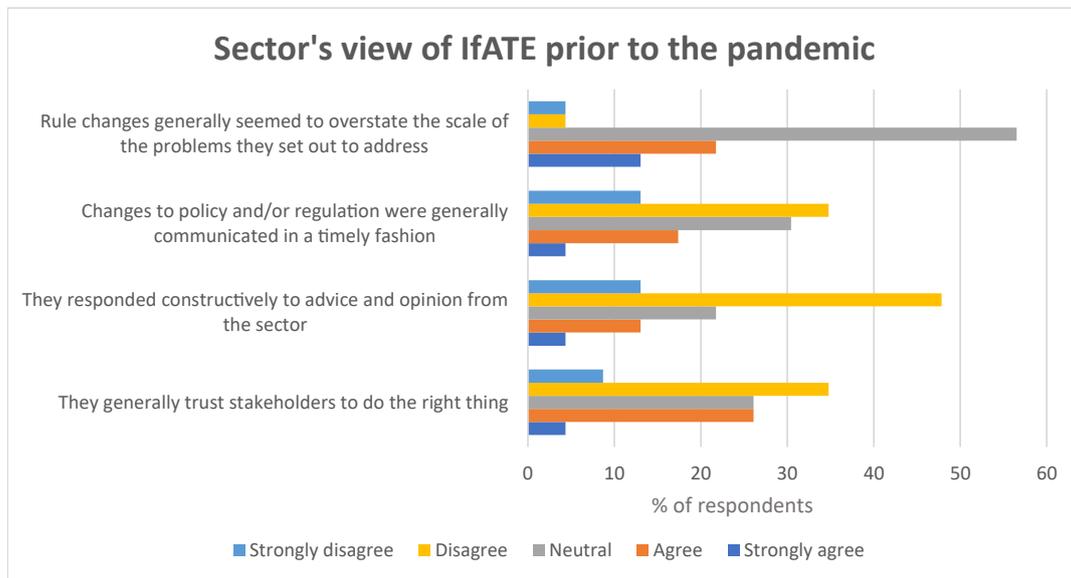
One respondent noted however that:

“

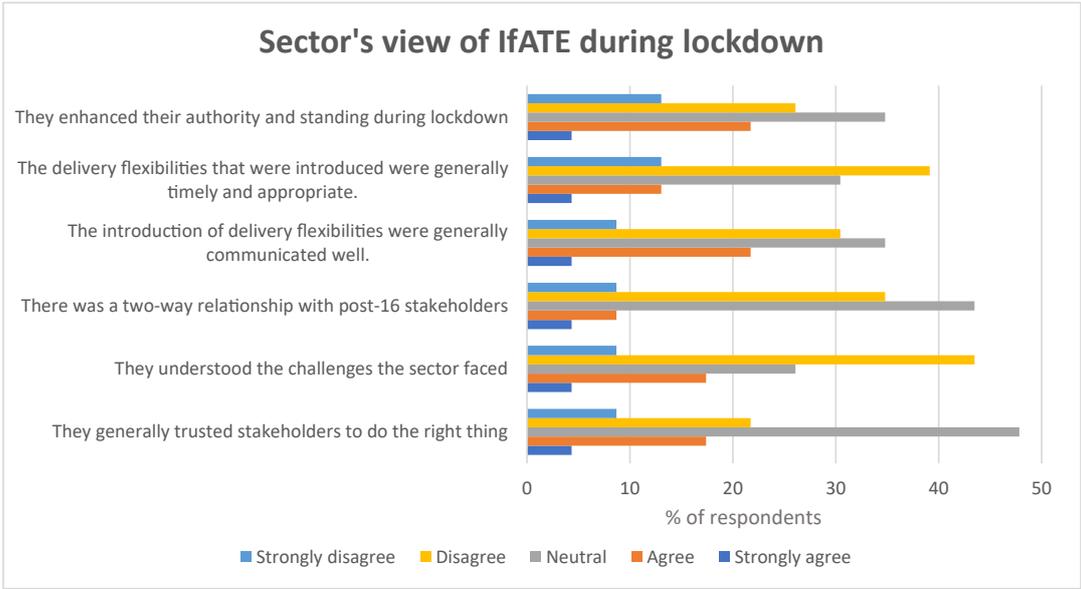
in the initial stages of lockdown there was a lack of urgency and pace....however as time has passed they have definitely become more responsive. ... (but) I do think there is a real over-optimism about a return to some form of normality. In recent days we have been encouraged to get 16-18s back in to college and this fails to reflect the very real challenges that are now emerging (such as) YPs from households who are shielding, students unable to get tested, staff unable to get tested etc. ... young people are reluctant to travel ... the extent of the disruption that this will cause across the whole sector.”

This however seems to stem from ESFA’s role as a facilitator of government policy rather than an instigator – if there are anomalies in the return-to-work or return-to-learning policy overall, then this is seen as from government itself and not its agencies.

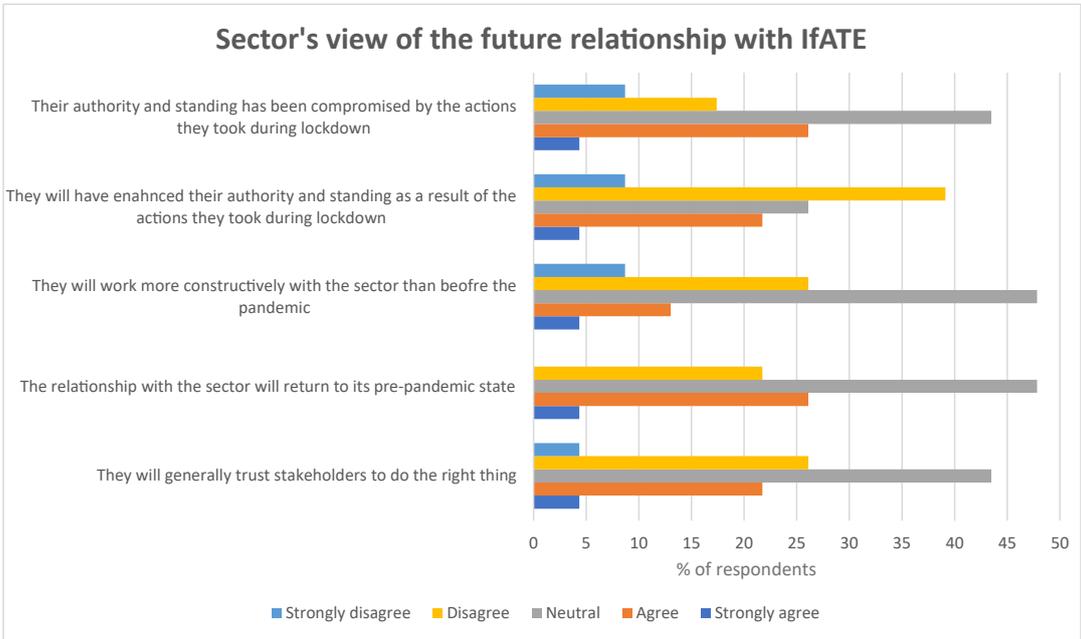
C. INSTITUTE FOR APPRENTICESHIPS AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (IFATE)



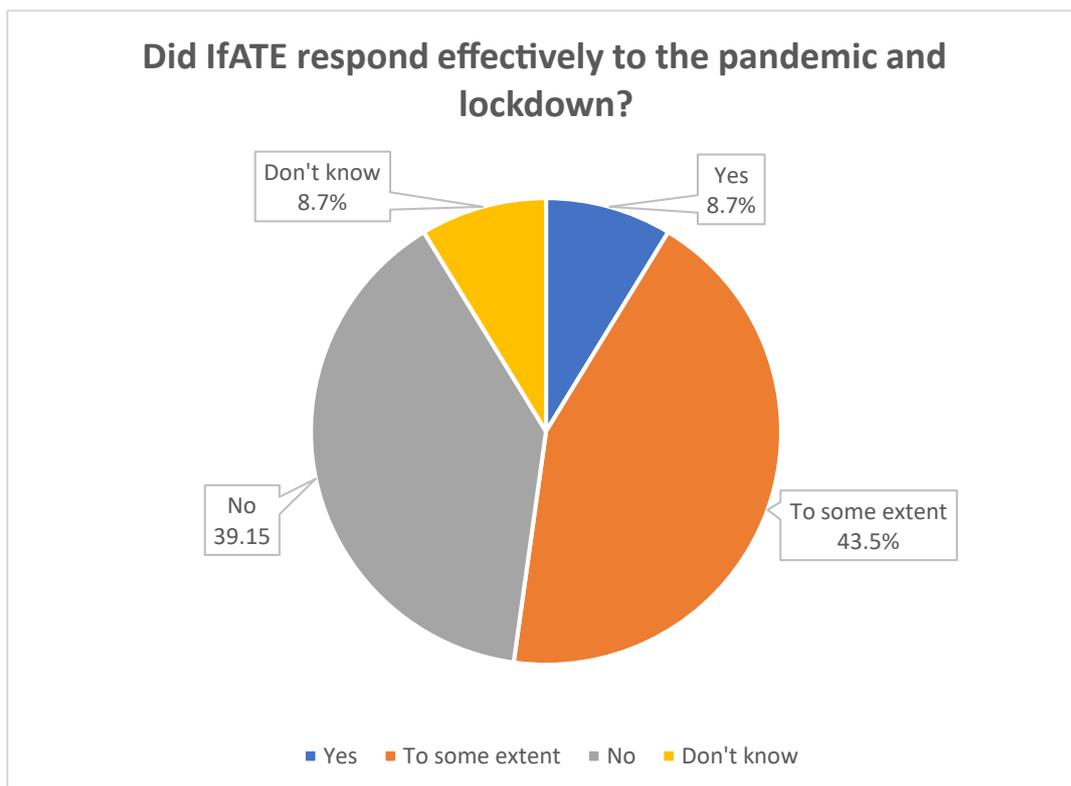
On balance the sector did not have a particularly positive view of IfATE prior to the pandemic. Although three of the four questions were framed positively, there was a good deal of disagreement with them, with 43% feeling that IfATE did not trust stakeholders, 61% feeling they did not respond constructively to the sector and 47% feeling they were not timely in their policy announcements. However, the remaining question - on whether rule changes generally seemed to overstate the scale of the problems they set out to address – was more negatively framed but provoked a high neutral score of over 56% (though even here nearly 38% actively disagreed with the proposition).



IfATE’s trust in its stakeholders was generally perceived to have improved during lockdown, as did its understanding of the challenges that they faced. However only 13% thought there was a two-way relationship and 38% did not agree that delivery flexibilities were well communicated – over half (52%) did not think the flexibilities offered were timely or appropriate and only 25% thought they enhanced their authority and standing in this period.



Most average scores for IfATE have been enhanced over the period of the pandemic, which follows through into results for how the sector may perceive them going forward. The average score for trust, constructiveness and the timeliness of their actions all rose. Despite this however the sector seems to retain a slightly jaundiced view of IfATE overall, with more respondents than not indicating that they had compromised (or at least not enhanced) their authority and standing.



This was reflected in responses to the question as to whether or not IfATE had responded effectively during lockdown: the proportion answering “to some extent” was the single biggest group, but the proportion answering “no” was of the same broad magnitude. This may be a reflection of the slightly fractious relationship that IfATE had with the sector in their early days of existence; even though the actions they took in the pandemic met with general approval there is a feeling coming through from these results that the sector feels IfATE may well eventually return to “business as usual” with nearly half (48%) thinking the relationship would return to its pre-pandemic state.

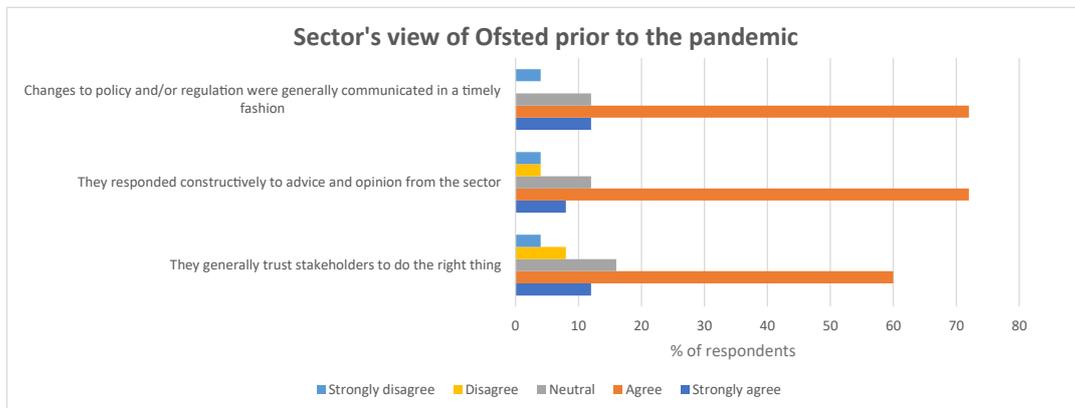
When taken with the previous results seems to indicate some grudging acknowledgement by the sector that the actions taken by IfATE were at least generally appropriate, but that the strains in their previous relationship with them would not be necessarily easily forgotten.

“

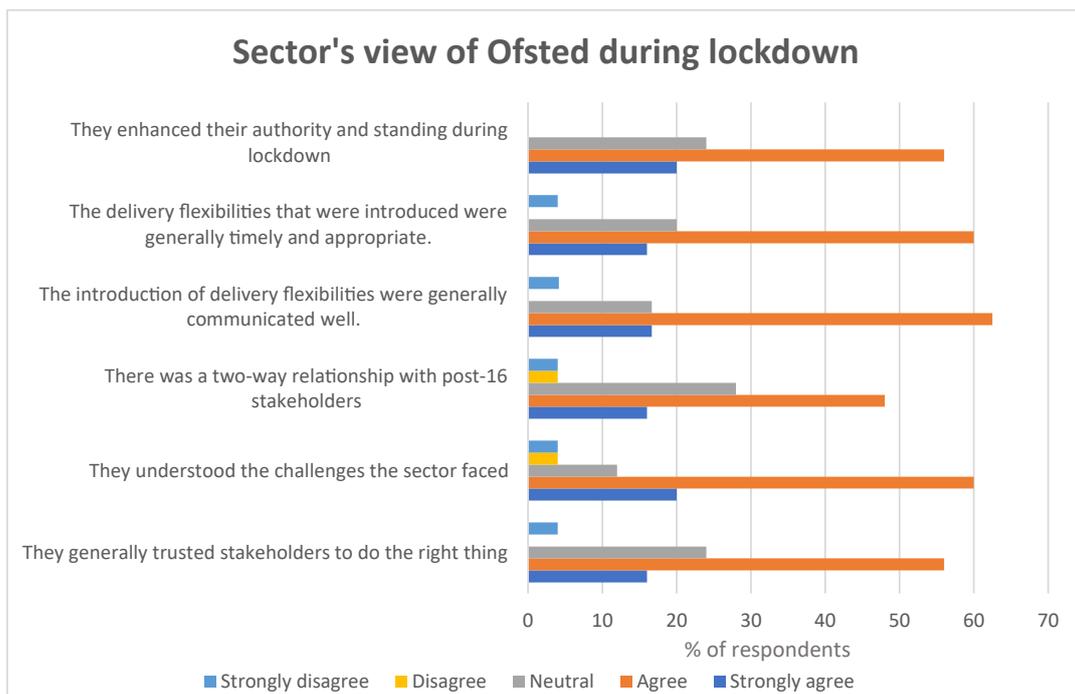
Slow and reactive communications (from IfATE) have caused disillusion when more positive action and guidance was required. While it was appreciated that the circumstances were unprecedented and approval was required from others, a greater sense of understanding and leadership would have been appreciated.”

Executive Director, independent training provider

D. OFSTED

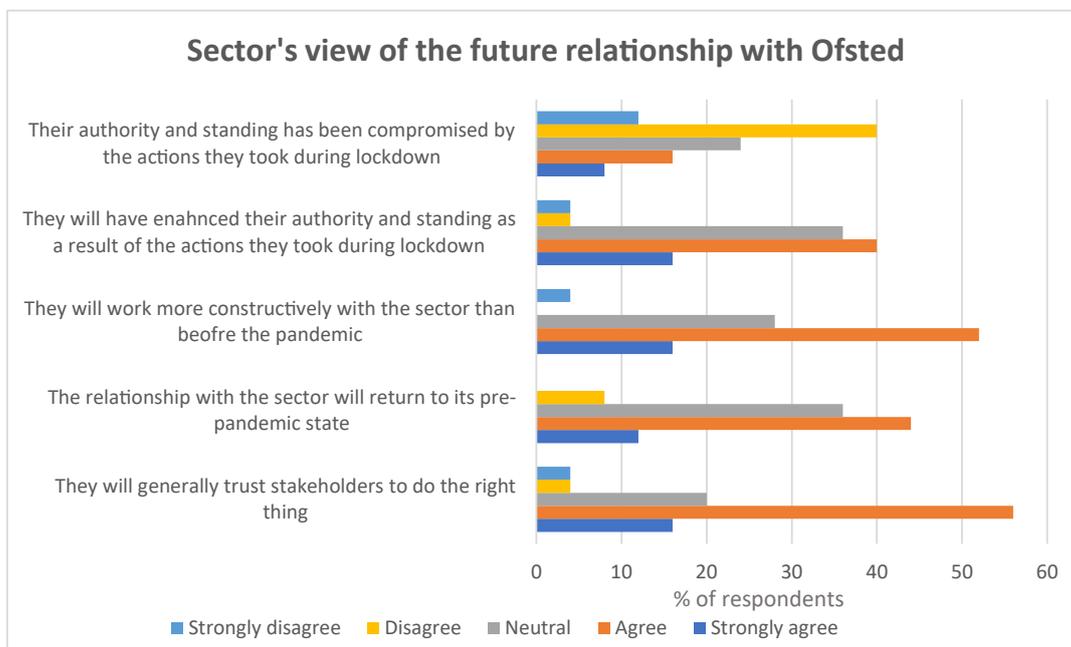


According to respondents, Ofsted were clearly held in considerable regard prior to the pandemic, with very strong positive scores on trust, their constructive approach and timeliness of communications.

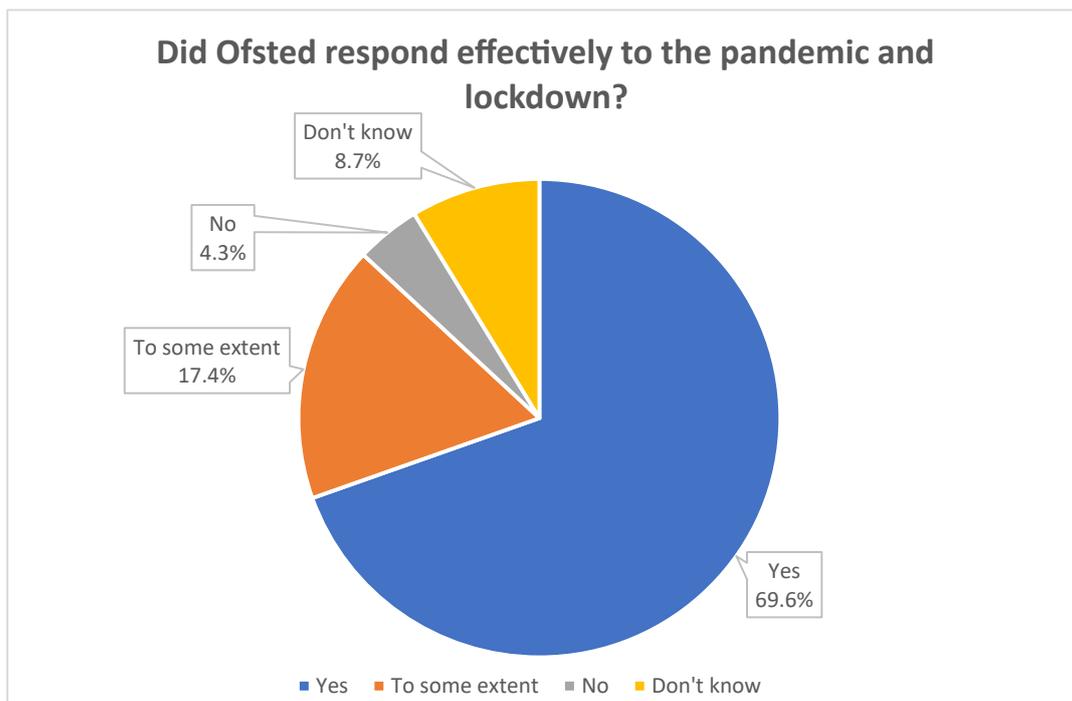


This followed through during the period of lockdown, with respondents to the question on trust merely shifting to “strongly agree” rather than “agree” in indicating a total of 72% agreement.

80% of respondents felt Ofsted understood the challenges they faced, 64% felt it was a good 2-way relationship and 79% thought Ofsted’s pandemic communications were timely. Overall, 76% thought they had enhanced their authority and standing over this period.



The trust issue was maintained once again when respondents were asked about the future relationship with Ofsted, with 66% saying they felt the relationship would return to its pre-pandemic state. Two-thirds of respondents thought Ofsted would improve the constructive approach to the sector and 56% say they enhanced their standing and authority.



This translates into an overwhelmingly positive summation of Ofsted’s effectiveness during the pandemic, with 87% agreeing they had responded effectively to at least some extent, and nearly 70% believing they had done so completely. One respondent said that “Ofsted were proactive and decisive and engendered greater confidence” – another said that “Ofsted understand providers and delivery far more than the ESFA or IfATE, both of whom are staffed with people with little or no experience of working with employers, their staff and individual learners. That’s why Ofsted understood the issues created by the pandemic and the others (whilst) DFE , IfATE and ESFA took far too long to take any action.”

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