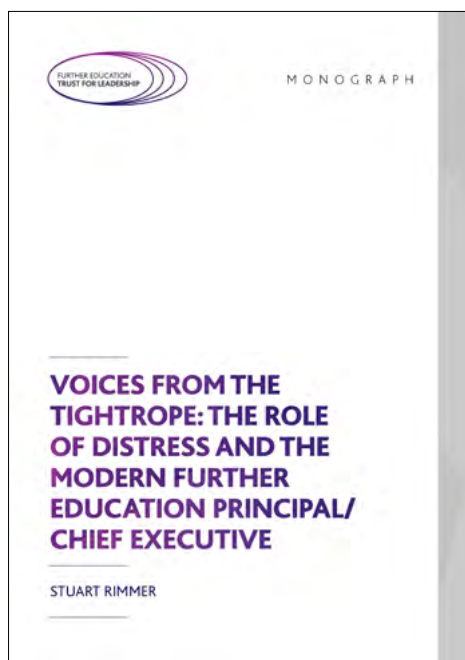


'On the tightrope': Distress in further education

A new FETL report considers the drivers of distress among FE leaders and asks what leaders can do to cope

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High levels of distress are becoming increasingly common among further education leaders, with principals blaming constant changes in policy and regulation, unreasonable expectations, uncertainty, and the threat of sanction, among other factors.

Leaders contributing to a new study from the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) report being 'on the tightrope' between the external pressures they faced and the need to protect staff from them, between the need to perform and be positive and the need to 'hide' their distress.

Written by Stuart Rimmer, CEO of East Coast College and Visiting Senior Fellow in Leadership and Management at University of Suffolk, *Voices from the Tightrope* draws on an online survey and eight semi-structured interviews with serving leaders to discover the extent to which FE chief executives and principals are experiencing distress, to define common triggers and to consider what mechanisms leaders can use to ameliorate distress.

The report recommends the development of peer support networks for leaders to allow authentic engagement and mutual support; more effective engagement between corporations and principals/CEOs to ensure that 'workloads are reasonable and sustainable' and principals 'have a wellbeing support package which could include self-care plans, coaching and/or mentoring and training in wellbeing'; and the review of the regulatory regime by senior officials and college representative bodies 'to ensure that unnecessary or unsustainable pressure is imposed through performance frameworks or the culture of their execution'.

Dame Ruth Silver, President of FETL, said: 'It has been one of the purposes of FETL in this latter phase of its operations, to get people talking about self-care and the health and wellbeing implications of leadership. I am delighted, therefore, to welcome Stuart's excellent paper. He offers a well-balanced piece of research, grounded in experience and well as scholarly expertise, and approached in a systemic, self-aware and professional way. Importantly, the tone is critical but not blaming. We have had too much of the culture of blaming in further education. We need instead to foster a climate of care and cooperation in the sector.'

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