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National Academy for  
Educational Leadership Wales

 Colegau Cymru  
Colleges Wales

# Understanding Leadership in the FE Sector in Wales

March 2023

 SEFYDLIAD DYSGU A GWAITH  
LEARNING AND WORK INSTITUTE



Ariennir gan  
Lywodraeth Cymru  
Funded by  
Welsh Government

This report is also available in Welsh

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## Introduction

The further education sector in Wales is a crucial part of the post-16 landscape. It offers learning opportunities and pathways for people of all ages in both vocational and general education as well as employability, adult community learning, and work-based learning. Colleges themselves are large, complex organisations that serve and work with diverse communities and complex stakeholders.

Over the last two decades the sector has undergone a process of transformation. There are now fewer but larger institutions in the sector. In some cases, institutions have acquired work-based learning providers while others are part of a family of institutions under the umbrella of a university. Institutions are multi-campus and serve communities across a wide geographic area.

In all cases, further education institutions are large, complex organisations requiring senior leaders who have a range of skills and experiences. The importance of effective leadership to the success of the institution is hard to underestimate, and so it follows that the sector must have a focus on investing in their leaders, have clear plans in place to support progression, retention and succession planning, and have diverse leadership teams with a range of experiences.

The findings and recommendations should all be seen in the context of not just the current post-16 landscape but also as relevant for the period when the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research will be established and responsible for the planning and oversight of the post-compulsory sector.

To support this work, Learning and Work Institute were commissioned by ColegauCymru to undertake research to help develop an understanding of:

- Recruitment, retention, talent management and succession planning across the sector.
- The nature of the current professional learning offer to leaders and what is needed for the future.
- The key barriers (real and perceived) to entering leadership roles, progressing through to senior leadership, and staying in leadership roles.
- Leaders' experience of their own and others' wellbeing. This would necessarily touch on the impact of the pandemic but would not be restricted to only this time period.

We would like to thank the many individuals from across the sector and elsewhere who took the time to respond to the survey, to be interviewed, or to take part in focus groups. Every one of them is incredibly busy leading their own institutions and organisations, and we are incredibly grateful for their time in helping to inform the research on which this report is based.

## Methodology

The research was undertaken through a mixed method approach of both qualitative and quantitative data. It comprised:

- Interviews with current and past senior leaders from the FE sector. These included current Principals and CEOs, Vice-Principals, and those on the senior leadership team with specific responsibility for HR. A total of 13 interviews were undertaken.
- Interviews with key external stakeholders, including Welsh Government, Estyn, and the National Academy for Educational Leadership. Advice was sought from the Education Workforce Council on specific findings and recommendations.
- A survey that was sent to all senior leaders in the sector to help determine some key baseline data. In total there were 72 responses to the survey and the results have been used to establish a baseline of data and to add relevant context to the qualitative data. Both Learning and Work Institute and ColegauCymru chased responses and we are satisfied that the level of the responses give us a sample from which to draw robust findings.
- Three online focus groups. Two were held with current senior leaders and one was held with those currently in middle management positions.

All responses were given on condition that the individual could not be identified.

It was not possible within the scope of the research to include Governors, although we recognise that these are another important part of recruitment and development of senior leaders.

## Summary of findings

Drawing on the data from across the whole research project a number of key findings have emerged. These are explored and explained in more depth later in the report, but the main findings are summarised below:

- There is significant activity across the sector to provide professional learning opportunities for senior and aspiring leaders at an institutional level (such as access to ILM qualifications and formal and informal coaching and mentoring). However, the support offered across the sector is inconsistent and stakeholders broadly felt there was scope for a more coordinated and national approach.
- The sector has a demographic challenge amongst the leadership cohort with 65% of senior leaders who responded to the survey likely to be retiring in the next 10 to 15 years. More than one in 10 senior leaders are over 60. At an institutional level there is an awareness and focus on succession planning but there does not appear to be a nationally coordinated response to planning for the future.

- A number of stakeholders identified a specific challenge in relation to the diversity of the leadership cohort across the sector in that there were relatively few black Asian and minority ethnic leaders. This is supported by the survey data, with 93% of senior leaders who responded identifying themselves as white. Despite identifiable progress having been made on gender balance within the leadership of the sector, stakeholders consistently identified the need for greater progress on ethnic diversity.
- Broadly speaking the sector tends to favour a focus on 'growing from within' and there is not a strong culture of considering recruitment at senior level from outside the sector. Stakeholders recognised both the benefits and the potential drawbacks from this approach. They identified the importance of senior leaders with detailed understanding of the complexity of the sector and aligned to the culture and purpose of FE, but also that not having a sufficient diversity of experience in the sector meant less exposure to new ideas and different ways of working.
- Both internal and external stakeholders identified the development of the middle tier of management as an area requiring additional focus and investment. Stakeholders identified a lack of a visible and understandable career pathway relative to the school sector, fewer opportunities for middle leaders to access formal and informal professional learning opportunities, and concerns over the perceived demands of senior roles and the loss of a manageable work-life balance.
- The health and wellbeing of leaders has been tested significantly during the pandemic but teams and individuals pride themselves on the resilience they have shown. Leaders are confident that they can access a range of support if needed. However there does not appear to be a consistent culture across all institutions of leaders feeling able to ask for help and support.
- Even months after the pandemic the health and wellbeing of senior leaders is still under considerable pressure. Workloads and the pace of working increased significantly during the pandemic and leaders are still working at this fast pace today. At worst there is a risk to the health and wellbeing of current leaders if this is not addressed and at least, it means that leaders have less time to manage their own health and wellbeing or to reflect and to plan for the future.

## Recommendations

Our recommendations are primarily for consideration by the FE sector, whether through ColegauCymru or through individual institutions. However there are some that are for other partners to consider.

Our recommendations are:

- While it is evident from interviews with stakeholders that FE leadership is a considerable strength of the sector, there is scope for a clear statement of ambition to help raise the quality across the sector. It should state the ambition for leadership in FE to be the very best in the Welsh public service sector, the expectation for leaders to model their commitment to professional learning and to wellbeing, and to learn from good practice elsewhere. This statement of ambition will help to set the direction of travel for leadership in the sector and to equip leaders with the skills they need for the future. When established, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research should work with ColegauCymru to jointly develop this statement and work jointly towards achieving the ambition.
- Too much professional learning for leaders within the sector takes place at an institutional level only and ColegauCymru should work with institutions and other partners to develop a nationally coordinated professional learning programme. This should explicitly include the opportunity to develop networks and experiences with other institutions and from organisations outside of the sector and outside of Wales. We recognise that this work would require resourcing and recommend the Welsh Government consider additional funding to build the required capacity to develop and deliver the programme.
- A key focus for the sector should be to develop a national programme to support middle management and aspiring leaders. ColegauCymru should consider once again commissioning or developing a nationally coordinated leadership programme that equips middle and aspiring leaders with the broad skills, networks, and external challenge required to help prepare them for senior leadership roles. Again this would be subject to available resources and capacity and should be a priority for discussion with the Welsh Government.
- Developing aspiring leaders and middle managers should be seen as part of a wider, sector-wide succession planning strategy. With the survey data showing that 65% of current senior leaders will be approaching retirement over the next 10-15 years, the sector must start planning now to develop the next generation of future leaders. While we recognise that some action will need to be taken at a local level to meet the needs of individual institutions, it is essential there is a nationally coordinated approach to help establish a broad pipeline of talent and to establish networks between leaders of the future.

- Given the importance of leadership at the middle management tier, Estyn should consider how they could incorporate the effectiveness of succession planning, support and leadership development for middle managers as part of their inspections.
- Professional learning and succession planning should have a specific focus on addressing inequalities in participation in senior leadership roles, particularly amongst women and from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. Action should focus on reviewing recruitment within the sector (including how and where posts are advertised) to increase the pool of black, Asian and minority ethnic candidates applying for roles and being supported to develop their experience and skills. Alongside this there should be a focus on developing aspiring women leaders so that the progress towards gender balance is accelerated. Responsibility for this action should sit with the Principals Forum of Colegau Cymru and the HR Network. There should be an explicit commitment to engaging with organisations with experience of this work outside the FE sector so that existing recruitment practices can be appropriately challenged.
- The experience of the sector amongst senior leaders is a source of strength and a demonstration of the commitment to the ethos and values of further education. However, the evidence also highlights a relative lack of recent external experience amongst senior role holders. To mitigate the risk of having a narrow pool of experiences in the sector, the network of HR Directors should work together to review job descriptions, person specifications, and experience requirements for senior roles to help attract as broad a range of candidates as possible. While recognising the requirement for curriculum experience for a number of roles, there should be opportunities to add to the breadth of experience and the exposure of the sector to different ways of working.
- The evidence from current senior leaders showed the value and importance of formal and informal networking opportunities to help share information and experiences, discuss the wider challenges facing leaders and institutions, and to build relationships across the sector. Examples given of these included subject specific networks, the Curriculum and Quality Group, and the HR Network. While recognising the need to balance this with the overall resourcing and demands on the organisation, there is scope to consider how best Colegau Cymru could support this, giving leaders greater access to both informal and formal networking opportunities as part of their professional development.
- One clear gap is the availability of data to help map and track the characteristics of the leadership cohort and to enable robust monitoring and assessment overtime. The Education Workforce Council collect data on leaders registered with them and they should be asked to collate and regularly publish data on the leadership cohort. The potential requirement for all Principals to register with the EWC would strengthen this data further and significantly improve what is currently available.

## Detailed Findings

### Personal and professional characteristics of senior leaders

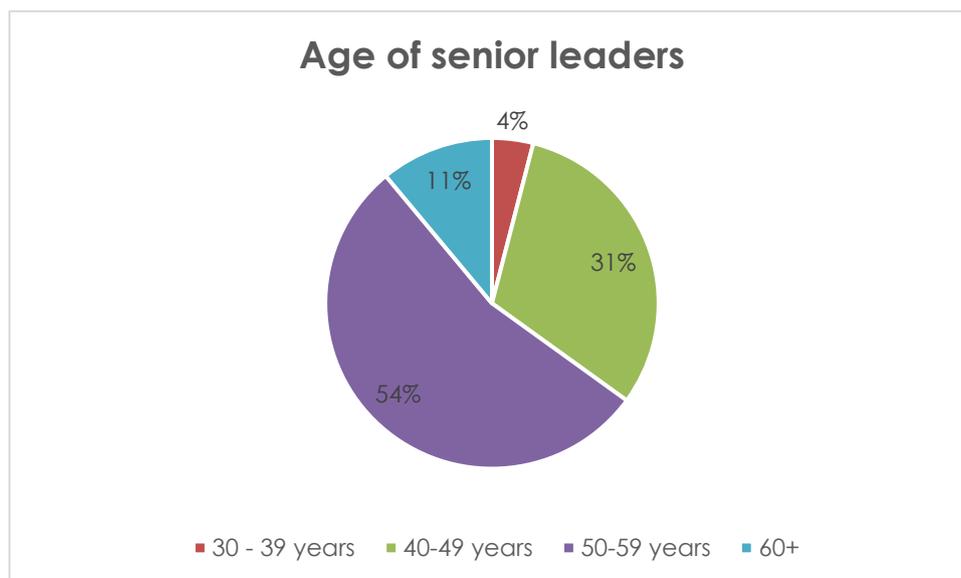
Using the findings from the survey of senior leaders, a baseline of data has been established to help the sector to understand some of the key characteristics and demographic information.

The survey was cascaded through HR Directors (or equivalents) within each institution. A total of 72 responses were received. The survey asked for some basic role information, such as job title, limited personal information (age, gender, and Welsh language proficiency), and more detailed information on professional background. Where appropriate, more detailed analysis of the survey questions has been included in the detailed findings later in the report.

**Age profile:** One key characteristic asked for in the survey was the age profile of senior leaders. As expected those in senior leadership positions are in the older age ranges, with 65% being over the age of 50. While this clearly reflects the seniority of the positions and the expected level of experience required to carry out the roles, it does mean that two-thirds of current senior leaders will be retiring or approaching retirement over the next 10 to 15 years.

It is clear from the interviews and the focus groups that succession planning is already an active part of the thinking at an institutional level but it is less clear that there is a coordinated response at a sector level. As will be referenced later in the report, there is scope for a more collaborative approach to developing career pathways and a substantive professional learning offer for aspiring leaders at middle management level and to widening the pool of talent from outside the sector.

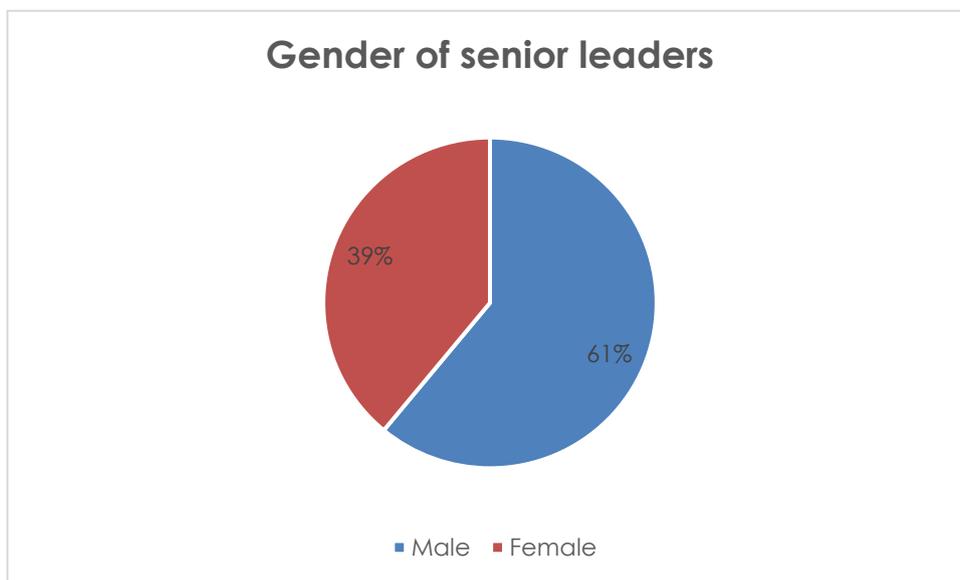
The data suggests that while there is not an immediate demographic challenge facing the sector, the timelines involved do mean that a response needs to be developed as a matter of some urgency.



L&W Survey: age of senior leaders in FE

**Gender profile:** The survey does suggest a disparity in the number of men in senior leadership positions, although it is also worth reflecting that the figure is comparable to the gender split of secondary school head teachers in Wales. Of the senior leaders who responded to the survey, 39% were women and 61% were men. As noted above, this is broadly comparable with secondary schools in Wales where 34% of head teachers are women.

However, given the relatively smaller size of the FE sector then smaller changes in the gender composition of leaders (especially at Principal level) could have a sharp impact on the overall balance. As will be evidenced later in the report in more detail, those working in the sector recognise the progress that has been made on ensuring more women have access to senior leadership roles but more work is needed to identify, develop, and support aspiring female leaders.



L&W Survey: gender of leaders in FE

**Welsh language proficiency:** From both the survey and the wider research there is evidence of a strong commitment to the Welsh language and to developing the proficiency of leaders in the sector.

One comment from a senior leader was typical of the evidence gathered. This individual talked about the commitment to investment in 'ensuring that the Welsh language capacity and capability is increased and sustained.'

Another leader questioned the extent to which the sector was meeting the expected standards of Welsh language competence at senior level:

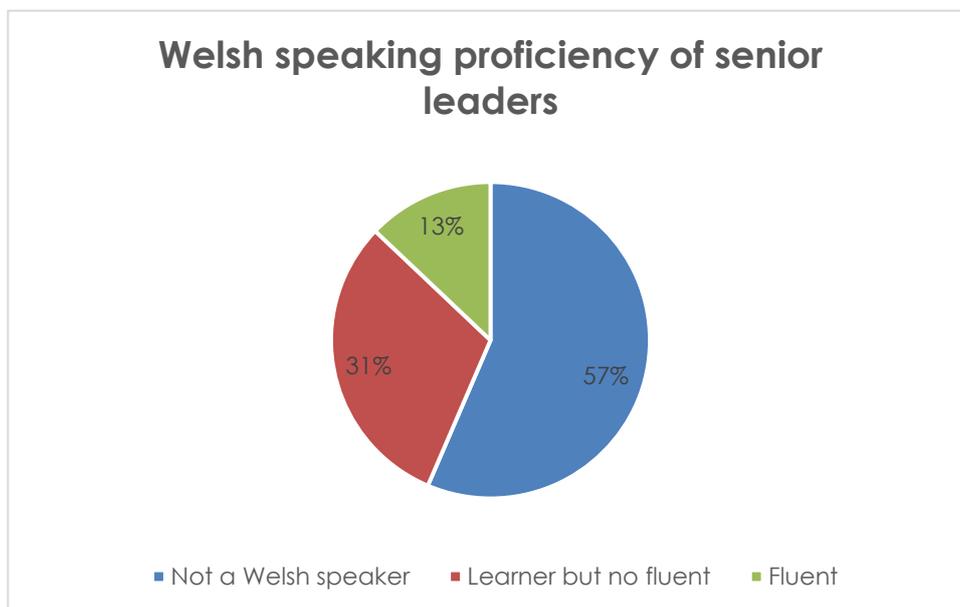
*'Welsh language competence is important, as is bilingual capability with the Welsh further education sector and we must question whether there are enough people at a high level who are able to speak Welsh.'* (Senior leader interview)

Leaders interviewed recognised the importance of greater Welsh language proficiency to both the internal and external work and highlighted the investment they are placing in it.

*‘Welsh language competency is essential in many leadership roles as senior leadership is outward facing to the community and the public as well as inward facing to the students and staff. The college is making significant investment in ensuring that capacity and capability is maintained.’ (Senior leader interview)*

There was also evidence from the focus groups of senior leaders understanding the expectations on them to model the commitment to learn and to use Welsh and applying this in their institutions. This was seen as an important part of embedding the use of Welsh across the college and demonstrating the importance to practitioners and the wider staff group.

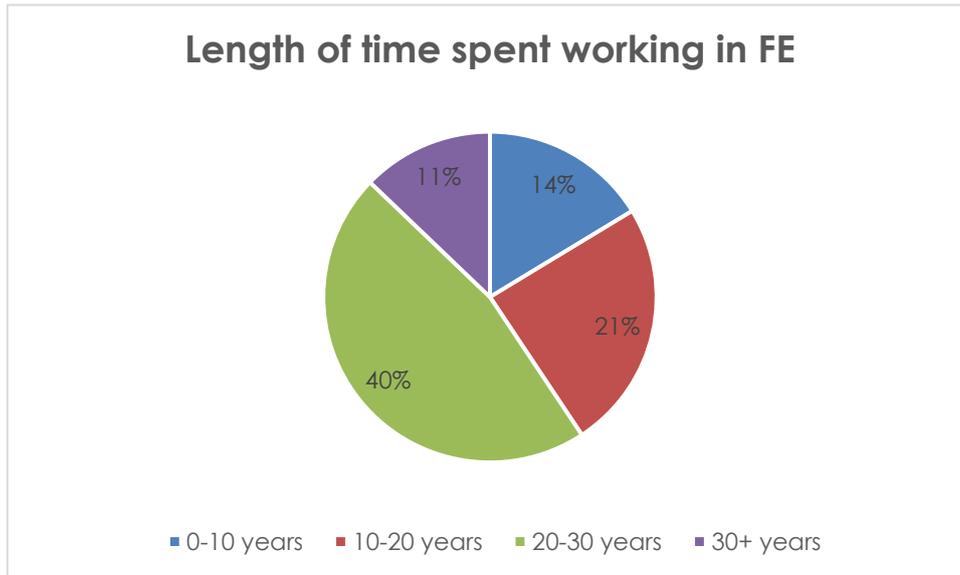
The scope of the research means that Welsh language proficiency has not been explored in detail but there is evidence of a high-level commitment to it from leaders. The research however does not reveal the extent to which it is used as part of day-to-day business across institutions. With the survey showing that 13% of leaders stated they were fluent Welsh speakers and 31% were learners but not fluent, there is clearly a strong basis on which to grow the skills and use of the language further.



*L&W Survey: Welsh language proficiency of leaders in FE*

**Length of time in the sector:** Finally on the characteristics of leaders in the sector it is worth reflecting on length of time they have spent working in FE. The survey data shows that 51% of leaders have spent more than 20 years in the sector, with 11% having more than 30 years’ experience.

Both this data and the qualitative research point to a culture of leaders having worked in the sector for a long period of time. This has helped to foster a commitment to the ethos, values and purpose of the FE sector. This is a considerable strength and likely to be a reason for the resilience of institutions during the pandemic. However, there is also evidence from some internal and external stakeholders that there is a lack of experience outside of the sector and consequentially little exposure to different ways of working. For middle leaders there is also a perception that their opportunities are more limited due to the length of time senior leaders stay in post.



*L&W Survey: the length of time senior leaders have worked in FE*

## Support for the professional learning of leaders and aspiring leaders

A key focus of the research was on the professional learning of both senior and aspiring leaders within the sector. Evidence was gathered through the survey of leaders as well as qualitative data through stakeholder interviews and the focus groups.

The evidence shows individual institutions take action to support the professional learning of both current leaders and those who aspire to leadership roles in the future. Every college we spoke to could evidence some form of in-house leadership programme and development and there was evidence too that these were popular and often over-subscribed. This reflects a clear commitment to an approach of ‘growing our own’ as part of wider succession planning strategies and a desire for leaders to develop their skills and capabilities.

Current senior leaders have a range of qualifications that are relevant to the role. A number of focus group participants had achieved a Masters in Education and Leadership and this was also reflected in the survey results. The survey also showed a number of leaders had achieved or were working towards ILM Level 7. There was however, no consistent pattern from the survey and there was evidence of a range of different pathways..

However, it is also clear that there are significant gaps in the support offered and the lack of a coordinated, national approach which means that access is inconsistent between institutions. Effort and resource is being duplicated and the opportunities to learn from each other are not maximised. Support for middle managers was also identified as an area where more focus should be placed by institutions and the sector as a whole. **There was overwhelming support for achieving a better balance between institution led learning and development opportunities and shared, nationally led approaches and for this to be a priority for the sector.**

**Nationally coordinated leadership support:** there was very strong support from stakeholders and leaders for some form of nationally coordinated professional learning opportunities to help complement institution led support.

Specifically, the *Leading Wales* programme was highlighted as an effective approach which was previously available to those aspiring to or currently within leadership roles. There was strong support for this kind of intervention being available again and for the strengths of the previous programme to be embedded in future interventions.

Specifically, previous participants emphasised the strengths of the Leading Wales programme based on their own experiences. These included:

- A programme of leadership support specifically focused on the Welsh FE sector and which could be applied quickly and practically to their roles;
- Opportunities for networking outside of their own institutions and to develop a community of leadership practice. This includes the opportunity to develop informal networks that can be accessed in the future;
- Space and opportunities for reflective practice and the opportunity of immersive learning experiences to develop skills in more depth.
- Learning which locates the role of FE within the wider Welsh public sector and within the broader aims and ambitions of Wales as a whole.

Those interviewed for the research, and especially those who had participated in the programme previously, strongly supported greater national coordination of the professional learning for leaders and the introduction of, along similar lines to, Leading Wales.

There was particular support for this kind of approach from CEOs / Principals interviewed for the research. They recognised the value of the Leading Wales programme and argued there should be a programme of formalised learning for aspiring leaders that could be supplemented by mentoring, coaching, and work placement opportunities.

In particular they valued the opportunity to gain experience from their peers in other organisations in Wales as well as the wider UK.

*'A key point to consider in looking at future learning and development programmes for senior leaders is to what extent can we provide senior leaders with the opportunity to gain experience from their peers in other organisations in Wales as well as the wider UK.'* (Senior leader interview)

**Opportunities for cross institution networking and peer support:** nearly all participants identified the opportunity to be able to network with colleagues from elsewhere in the sector as valuable learning opportunities. They highlighted the value of being able to discuss how others were addressing similar challenges, the space for reflective and peer-to-peer support, learning about different ways of working, and identifying further opportunities for collaboration.

Despite the value of these opportunities, many participants felt that they had fewer opportunities than before to network with colleagues outside of their own institutions. While the Curriculum and Quality Group and the networks for both finance and HR leads were mentioned as positive examples, the broad view was that there should be more opportunities to learn from one another as part of an explicit strategy to make connecting across institutions a part of a national professional learning strategy, and this is an area where CollegesWales should be looking to provide greater leadership.

This feeling was particularly acute amongst middle leaders. They viewed the opportunity to meet with colleagues doing similar roles in other institutions as being helpful for the day-to-day roles but also an invaluable part of their informal professional learning.

*'They help people to develop programmes, share resources, review approaches. But they also give people that first stage of leadership development, even for those currently below middle management level.'* (Middle management focus group)

**Place a specific focus on middle management:** both internal and external stakeholders recognised the importance of having a specific focus on middle management within the sector as part of a comprehensive approach to succession planning.

There was clear evidence of institutions having plans and processes in place to support the development of middle managers, but again it appears these often take place in isolation from other institutions in the sector and provision is variable. The range of interventions identified included formalised and accredited learning in partnership with a local university, leadership development that includes working with a local housing association, and aspiring leader programmes delivered internally.

For example, one college we spoke to offers an ILM Level 5 to middle managers. They recognised that while they offered staff the opportunity to take on new roles and to develop their skills, these opportunities were limited and 'often working within a very narrow silo and without the understanding of the other departments.'

The college identified the next step for these staff was to develop their leadership and management skills and to support their potential progression into the roles of Deputy Head or other junior and middle management positions. The college recognised that given the lack of suitable external support and development opportunities they had to provide a bespoke programme for these aspiring managers. This would provide the details of the various departments, networking opportunities, team working and team leader skills, and wider leadership skills. Their stated aim was to ‘provide a thorough understanding of each aspect of the college and to develop the initial management skills so that staff were able to advance to the role of junior / middle management.’

The college can evidence their success, with approximately 50 staff having achieved their ILM Level 5 Award and staff having advanced to the roles of middle management both within the college and externally. The college has started the process of sharing this experience and the qualification with another institution, which will help to offer reciprocal support, networking, and development opportunities.

Full details of both the ILM 5 and ILM 7 offered by the college are included in the annex of this report.

There was also good evidence that many colleges have embedded coaching as part of their support for both existing and future leaders and there is widespread use of formal and informal mentoring and shadowing.

However, despite these range of approaches at an institutional level there was a clear view amongst internal stakeholders that more work is still needed.

*‘We need to do more for middle managers. What’s lacking is something for the middle tier (of managers), including both at an institutional level and a national programme. The programme needs breadth and access to a broader spectrum of views.’ (Focus group participant)*

This was also the specific view of external stakeholders. One stakeholder interviewed stated:

*‘There is a question about whether we are doing enough to support the development of middle managers. Currently we don’t have anything at a national level to take people from the middle and into senior roles.’ (External stakeholder)*

This message was reinforced in a separate interview by another external stakeholder who referred to a ‘middle leadership problem’ and argued for a nationally run, blended learning offer for middle managers that explicitly offered the opportunity for cross-sector and peer-to-peer support. This would expose middle leaders to different ways of working and develop their knowledge and understanding of settings outside their own institution.

## Barriers to recruitment, retention, and development of leaders

A key question for the research was the extent to which institutions struggle to recruit, retain, and develop leaders. In broad terms, although there were no widespread or significant challenges identified about the recruitment and retention of leaders and there was an identifiable, successful culture across the sector of growing leaders from within, the sector does have issues to address.

It is evident that there is no uniform picture across the sector as a whole and each institution faces specific challenges that are particular to their own circumstances. Given these are specific to institutions it wouldn't be appropriate to go into detail in the report, but it is worth noting some examples from the research:

- **Geography:** where an institution is located naturally has an impact on the capacity to attract applicants from outside of the institution. In particular, institutions closer to the border evidenced their ability to attract applicants from the sector in England and how this added depth to the pool of talent available to them. Institutions further from the border reported that they tended to have more internal applicants and candidates from neighbouring Welsh institutions. While this wasn't seen as a barrier to the quality of the final appointment, they did feel it limited the pool of applicants to shortlist and appoint.
- **Size of institution:** smaller institutions referenced the challenge of providing appropriate career pathways when the number of senior positions available was more limited than in neighbouring colleges. It was noted that this can create a challenge around the retention of middle and aspiring leaders in particular.
- **Succession planning for leaders approaching retirement:** a number of stakeholders noted a particular challenge of Principals and other senior leaders approaching retirement at relatively similar times and the specific challenge for succession planning this can present. Succession planning more generally is discussed in more depth in the report.
- **Multi-campus responsibilities:** although there was no evidence of this from other stakeholders, there was some concern from one external stakeholder that the distances between some campuses was placing a strain on some leaders and was a potential barrier to retention within the sector. Although this was not specifically supported, it is potentially an issue within some institutions where there are large distances to travel between sites and where leaders have whole college responsibilities that mean they are required to travel between sites.

As noted previously there is a strong culture across institutions of looking to develop and support aspiring and future leaders. There are examples of institutions having specific programmes for middle leaders, although as already referenced, these have often been developed in isolation from other parts of the sector. There was evidence that there could be a greater focus on talent identification programmes, instead development opportunities are made available evenly to individuals working at a particular level within institutions. It is though clear from our findings that institutions place an emphasis on developing aspiring leaders as part of a general approach to

succession planning, although the evidence also suggests that more could still be done to improve diversity of experience and personal characteristics of the people supported and that there is a clear opportunity to strengthen this area of work through greater national coordination and collaboration.

There is an important role for governing bodies of institutions creating an environment for effective succession planning. This was recognised by a range of participants. Also noted was the importance of a governing body drawn from diverse backgrounds and experiences and who are able to challenge senior leadership teams in a constructive and effective way.

*'The governing body of the college is also key to succession planning and plays a key role in supporting the Principal in identifying those people who have a good cultural and behavioral alignment with the college.'* (Senior leader interview participant)

The focus groups and the interviews with stakeholders did however identify some sector wide challenges around recruitment and development.

**Clear and visible pathway for aspiring leaders:** the experience of both the internal interview and focus group participants, as well as the views of external stakeholders, is that there is not a clear and visible career pathway into leadership in the sector. In particular, this was mentioned explicitly by the external stakeholders interviewed.

There was specific reference to what is perceived to be the lack of a pathway from teaching and into senior leadership roles and their perception was that this makes progression, development and retention more difficult.

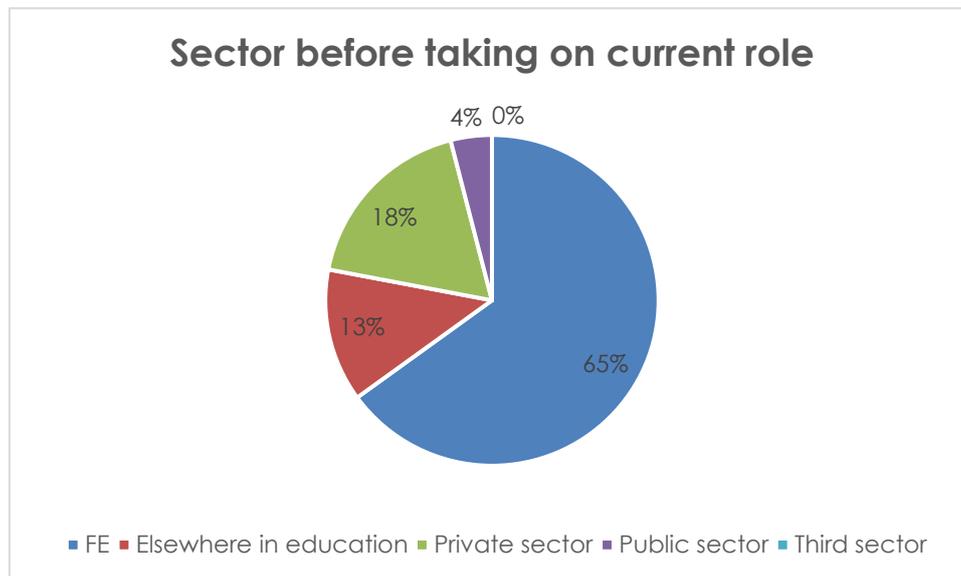
*'Career pathways for aspiring leaders are not so well understood or shared.'* (External stakeholder)

This was mentioned particularly in reference to the school sector where there is perceived to be a much clearer route into senior roles and an understanding of the professional development and learning required.

However, while there is some evidence to support this position our findings suggest a more nuanced picture. The sector rightly prides itself on having a culture of development from within and the need to ensure leaders reflect the values of the further education sector. The effectiveness of this approach is evidenced by the high proportion of survey respondents who worked in the sector before taking up their current role.

Of the survey of current senior leaders, 65% said they worked in further education immediately prior to taking up this role. A further 13% worked elsewhere in education. This suggests there is a

route into senior leadership roles for those already working in the sector, as well as the importance placed on educational experience (both vocational and academic) for curriculum facing senior roles.



L&W Survey: sector worked in before taking on current role

Furthermore, the evidence of institutions investing in the development of aspiring leaders suggests that there is an identifiable step from middle to senior leadership roles and that this is understood within the sector. A number of institutions could rightly point to the provision of ILM qualifications for aspiring and current leaders and mentoring and coaching of middle leaders as evidence of a credible career pathway. However, the lack of a nationally coordinated and recognised qualification pathway also suggests that this pathway is underdeveloped.

Middle leaders themselves also described a lack of opportunity for them to progress into senior positions. They argued that opportunities were rare as people tended to stay in post a long time once they were appointed to senior positions and there were just a smaller number of potential vacancies overall.

*‘There are now fewer colleges overall than there used to be. This means that there are fewer posts and potential vacancies as before. So, there are just fewer opportunities to progress than there used to be.’ (Middle management focus group)*

Our finding is therefore that while there is an understandable and identifiable progression point from middle to senior leadership roles, more work is needed to help aspiring leaders to understand and to develop the specific leadership skills, competencies, and attributes needed for the most senior positions. Both formal and informal professional learning opportunities for middle and aspiring leaders should reflect the capabilities required for senior leadership. These will be described in more detail later in the report.

It is though certainly the case that relative to the school sector in particular, the pathway into leadership is not as clear and there is scope for the sector to address this in partnership with the Welsh Government and with other key sector organisations.

**A more diverse leadership cohort:** there was widespread recognition from interview participants (internal and external) that the sector faced a specific challenge with the diversity of both the current and future leadership cohort.

While there was recognition of the progress that had been made in ensuring a greater proportion of women were in senior leadership roles, there was also an honest assessment that the cohort of leaders and potential leaders of the future is predominantly white.

*‘We need to do more on equality and diversity. Both the workforce and leadership are predominantly white. We have made a lot of progress on gender balance but not on ethnicity.’ (Internal interview participant)*

The relative progress on gender balance across senior leadership positions is reflected in the survey results, with 39% of respondents women and 61% men. Interview and focus group participants shared the view that there has been good progress in achieving a better gender balance across leadership positions although they also recognised the need for sustained progress and to maximise the pipeline of aspiring women leaders.

A much more striking issue for the sector is the ethnic diversity of leadership teams. The results of the survey data demonstrate the scale of the challenge, with 93% of those responding to the survey identifying as white.



These findings were also supported by evidence from both internal and external stakeholders interviewed and by the findings of the focus groups:

*'Leadership in the sector is generally very white and this reflects college workforces more generally. Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities are under-represented in the leadership cohort, and this is something the sector seems to recognise. (External interview participant)*

*'Our experience has been that the recruitment of leaders and future leaders from more ethnically diverse backgrounds is very difficult. If you are looking for people who already work in the sector, then there is a very small pool of people to draw from (Focus Group participant).*

There was widespread recognition that this lack of diversity was a problem for the sector and that it was important for learners and communities to be able to see themselves reflected in the leadership of institutions.

*'Leaders and middle leaders don't reflect the diversity and population of the communities we serve.'* (Focus Group participant)

There was good recognition that the steps taken by the sector to engage the Black FE Leadership Group was a positive sign of intent, but no one underestimated the amount of progress needed in this area and nor did they necessarily feel that they had the answers. Most importantly there was a widespread commitment to addressing the problem and recognition that more action was needed.

*'If we keep only growing our own, we won't change the diversity of our leaders.'* (Focus Group participant)

*'The next stage of development for the organisation is to increase the visible diversity in terms of race, gender, and disability to support the underpinning vision of respect for all.'* (Senior leader interview participant)

External stakeholders interviewed broadly shared the same views as those working in the sector, although they were more challenging around the extent to which the sector was focused on addressing them. One stakeholder questioned whether the sector and other partners were *'investing enough in talent identification and making our leadership teams more diverse.'* Another external stakeholder recognised that while the challenge reflected a lack of diversity within the FE workforce as a whole, a specific focus was needed to identify diverse talent and provide opportunities for development.

**Barriers at middle management:** although not a view shared by all interview participants, there was nonetheless some evidence from some senior leaders of particular challenges in recruiting and retaining middle leaders.

*'The main challenge is attracting people into the middle management positions.'* (Senior leader interview)

The specific issues raised in relation to recruiting and retaining middle management staff were:

- Salaries are not as high or attractive as they could be in terms of stepping up into middle management. There is concern that the increase in salary doesn't necessarily compensate for the increase in responsibilities and therefore creates a disincentive to take this step. This was a view shared by participants in the middle management focus group who agreed that middle management was *'one of the most pressured roles and involve demands and pressures from above and below.'*
- There is competition from other educational organisations for middle management staff and for aspiring leaders. In particular, staff at this level can be mobile and their skillsets attractive to schools and to higher education and also to roles in industry.
- Participants in the middle management focus groups identified the additional skills required to make the jump from middle to senior leadership roles. Specifically, they referenced the focus at middle management on operational duties and how it was perceived as difficult to then make the jump into a more strategic role. They argued this should be a specific focus of a professional learning offer for middle managers.

A further barrier identified was the perception that the scale of the most senior roles was a barrier to aspiring leaders wanting to progress. This was particularly seen as a challenge when leaders were considering taking on the role of Principal / CEO.

*'Attracting people to the number one position in organisations is challenging in that colleagues don't seem to want to get to the top job and are content to remain as deputy. There is a challenge around the perception of the size and scale of responsibility of the top job and prospective leaders can be overwhelmed by the range and depth of what is required.'* (Senior leader interview)

This concern was not confined to only the role of Principal / CEO but also to other senior leadership roles:

*'The responsibility and accountability at the senior level is a consideration and colleagues do not apply for leadership as the role is perceived as being challenging and some may be concerned that it will impact their wellbeing.'* (Senior leader interview)

A further barrier identified was the perception (accurate or otherwise) around the difficulty of achieving an adequate work-life balance in more senior roles. Aspiring leaders are weighing these choices when considering future roles.

*'Some individuals also make life choices prioritising family and personal life above a career. There may be a challenge around helping colleagues to create a work-life balance and understand that you can have a career and still maintain a healthy family life.'* (Senior leader interview)

Senior leaders and HR leads interviewed identified specific mitigations they had put in place to address some of these barriers. These included restructuring 'to distribute workloads fairly and considerable investment in management training.' Others identified specific ILM management courses that have been created at institutional level and there is the widespread use of informal mentoring between middle and senior leaders. Some institutions highlighted their use of external coaching consultants and a more formalised approach to mentoring.

As already noted, the middle management tier within the sector is crucial for the longer-term strength of leadership. Collective and institution led action should be a priority for the sector.

**Balance of sector and external experiences:** a common challenge identified by the interview and focus group participants was the diversity of experiences and backgrounds of current leaders.

Specifically, there was a view that while the culture of growing from within had helped to foster leaders who were committed to the sector and understood the culture and ethos of further education, at times this limited the diversity of experience of leaders.

Focus group participants recognised this was a difficult balancing act for the sector. There was a strongly held view that a background in teaching (whether vocational or academic subjects) was an important prerequisite for curriculum focused roles. This was primarily due to the need to understand effective teaching practice and pedagogy, as well as the broader landscape of qualifications and specific subject demands.

*'Senior leaders with responsibility for the curriculum tend to have a curriculum background. That is only natural. They need to have credibility with teaching and learning.'* (Focus Group participant)

*'We (the sector) will tend to be more focused on FE background candidates, especially those with a curriculum background.'* (Focus Group participant)

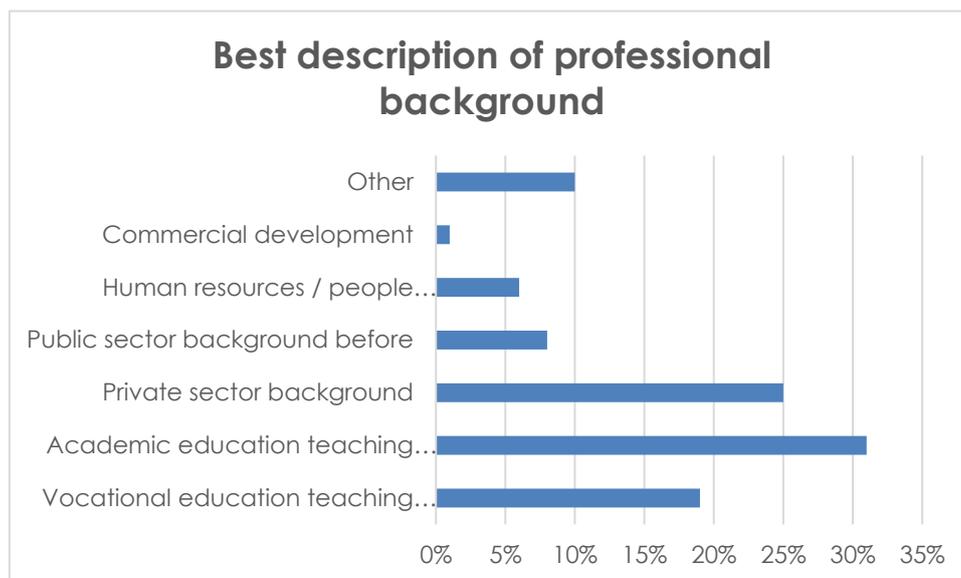
However, there was also recognition that the demands of leading large, complex organisations where the day-to-day responsibilities can be more managerial and organisational, will require a specific and potentially broader set of capabilities and competencies. There was a widely held view that roles which are not primarily curriculum focused (such as finance, people and HR, and estates management) are those most suited to leaders from outside the sector or with non-teaching backgrounds.

*‘There are very few senior leaders not from an educational background. There is an expectation you need to have an educational background. There is a misconception that you need an educational background to do a senior role, even though 90% of the role is really about running a large business.’ (Internal stakeholder)*

This is supported by evidence from the survey which suggests that although there is a relatively high proportion of senior leaders from a predominantly private sector background, these were primarily in non-curriculum or organisational roles. Of the 25% of respondents who identified themselves as

having a private sector background, two-thirds of their stated job titles were explicitly focused on non-curriculum responsibilities. These included responsibility for HR, resources, finance or job titles such as Operating Officer.

The average length of service in FE for all those respondents who identified as coming from a predominantly private sector was 20 years, which suggests that their experience of the private sector is not particularly current.



Some focus group participants highlighted experience of their own institutions recognising the need for a greater breadth of experience on senior teams. There were examples of institutions explicitly seeking to recruit externally in order to fill gaps in the competencies and capabilities of their current teams. Others referenced occasions when through the design of a job advert and job description their institutions deliberately sought to meet a specific skill requirement and this attracted more external candidates.

There was evidence that the need to strike the right balance between leaders with strong backgrounds in FE or education and those with more external experience of the private, public or

third sectors was a live issue that was understood by the sector. There was recognition too that each institution would need to seek to address this in their own way and that this would be dependent on the geography, size, complexity and internal and external challenges facing each institution.

*'There is no right or wrong way. It is about the role and the balance on the leadership team within each college. It is bad not to have an understanding of the sector across your leadership team, but also bad not to have that breadth of experience of different ways of working.'* (Focus group participant)

The culture of growing from within was undoubtedly viewed as a strength of the sector but many also recognised it risks reinforcing existing practices and limiting the exposure of the sector to new ideas and ways of working. It was also recognised that drawing heavily on the existing FE workforce will not address the significant challenge of building a more diverse leadership team across the sector.

Our evidence finds a sector that is aware of its strengths and recognises too that it does not have all the answers to the question of how to address its weaknesses. There is no 'easy to implement' solution or short-term fixes to the challenge of diversity in the sector or how to ensure a balance of experiences. Some solutions will need to be implemented at institutional level but despite the competition for talent across the sector, it is clear that meeting these challenges will require a coordinated response, the sharing of best practice, and a commitment to collaborative leadership.

## Leadership attributes and qualities

There was a broad consensus across interview participants around the qualities and attributes required by senior leaders in the sector. These often helped to guide internal professional learning and leadership development programmes and in some cases there was evidence that these were informed directly by the sector's professional standards.

There is already considerable work underway in this area, led in part by the Education Workforce Council and the Welsh Government's post-16 Workforce Development Steering Group. In particular, there is work already in development focused on a silhouette of the skills, attributes, and qualities required for the role of Principal / CEO. We have found a strong correlation between the draft of the silhouette and the views on both internal and external stakeholders interviewed for this research.

There is a particular phrase in the silhouette which closely echoes the findings from this research on the role of leaders in the sector:

*'The designation of our role as 'Chief Executive and Principal' signals the importance of developing and championing the quality and breadth of education provided within our college, alongside business leadership.'* (Draft – Silhouette, FE Principals / CEOs)

This demonstrates the breadth of responsibilities and skills required for the role, but also the importance of understanding both education and the system / business leadership.

The key attributes / qualities identified by external and internal stakeholders through the research for this report are summarised below. It is not intended as an exhaustive list but rather a reflection of where there was a particular emphasis from multiple stakeholders or where there is a specific insight worth pulling out into the report.

- **Reflective leadership:** the capacity to be reflective and to plan for improvement. Requires the skills to self-evaluate and reflect on decisions and practice. For Principal / CEO and for senior postholders in curriculum-based roles, experience of teaching and learning is required in order to have credibility.
- **Resilience:** this was noted as a key skill by nearly all stakeholders. Even leaving aside the impact of the pandemic, leaders need to be resilient in the face of change and internal / external challenges. Participants emphasised the importance of resilience being built through strong, collaborative teams. They stressed resilience wasn't a test of how much leaders could shoulder on their own but how they built resilience into the wider leadership team through the right mix of skills and personal qualities.
- **Collaborative:** those interviewed stressed the importance of collaborative leadership in respect of both internal and external stakeholders. Internally this might take the form of dispersed leadership, the ability to communicate and work with / lead a team. Externally the ability to work collaboratively within a local post-16 sector and to build partnerships with a diverse range of external stakeholders were all emphasised as important attributes and skills.
- **Adaptable:** in part this was linked by interview participants to the ability to be resilient but recognised the pace of change in the sector and importance of leaders being able to adapt to internal and external challenges but also to ensure there is still a clarity of mission.
- **Advanced negotiator:** the ability to negotiate with a range of key stakeholders was identified as a key skill for all leaders. It was stressed that this required the ability to adopt a range of negotiating skills when working with a diverse range of internal and external partners. Examples given included the ability to lead or be part of industrial relations at a college or Wales level, to work with other FE institutions and networks, to engage with Welsh Government on policy, practice, funding, and to work internally with other senior leaders, staff, learners, and community partners.
- **Model for professional learning and wellbeing:** participants stressed the importance of senior leaders modelling best practice in respect of the values and behaviours an institution expects. This includes taking their professional learning and their own wellbeing seriously

and being seen to model the behaviour the institution rightly expects of others. This was referenced, for example, in respect of developing and using Welsh language skills. It was emphasised that leaders needed to demonstrate to staff the importance of managing their own health and wellbeing and establishing an effective work-life balance.

## Supporting the health and wellbeing of leaders

The extent to which leaders are supported and enabled to manage their own health and wellbeing was an important focus of the research. Broadly speaking there is a positive picture across the sector in terms of the support that is available to support leaders. There is a good awareness amongst leaders of the importance of wellbeing both for them as individuals, of senior leadership teams as a whole, and of the wider staff teams that they manage.

At an institutional level there is a good awareness of the need to support the wellbeing of senior leaders. In some cases this is in the form of them accessing organisation wide activities and resources, while in other institutions there is a more bespoke and tailored approach. Again, there isn't a coherent approach across the sector and there is scope for colleagues leading health and wellbeing activities to learn from each other and to share best practice.

Participants all agreed that they would be able to access support with their health and wellbeing if they needed and requested it. However, there was a difference of opinion about the extent to which there is a culture amongst senior leaders of asking for support. While some reflected the view that there was *'no barrier to asking for help and that it wouldn't be frowned upon'*, others argued that even though there were not specific barriers *'there is not necessarily a culture or the space to manage your own health and wellbeing.'* At the very least these differences in perspectives and views suggest that some cultural barriers to supporting the health and wellbeing of leaders do exist in the sector.

The discussions on health and wellbeing naturally tended to focus on the experience of the pandemic and this has impacted on ways of working, workload, and the pressures of leadership at a time of unprecedented demand on the sector.

Focus group participants all agreed that staff across the sector have been under incredible pressure as a result of the pandemic and that it has tested the resilience of leaders and leadership teams. However, they also stressed that workload and the pace of working experienced during the pandemic hasn't eased off even though infection levels have dropped. Demands on the sector and on leadership teams is still incredibly high. A number of focus group participants told us that the pace and scale of their day-to-day workload was becoming unsustainable and left little time to reflect on their experience of the pandemic and how the sector needed to change in the future.

*'We were in crisis mode (during the pandemic) and the speed at which we were working was very fast. We are still working at that pace now. There is no time to reflect and to work to a longer time frame.'* (Focus Group participant).

*'There is no 'white space' time when we have the opportunity to reflect and to think. It is relentless and always a race against time. It feels like we are running a marathon the whole time.'* (HR lead interview).

*'We are still on the hamster wheel of working during the pandemic. When do we decide to stop?'* (Focus group participant).

*'The pandemic was about emergency management and the pace of working has continued. The pace of working has become the new normal. Lots of things get thrown at the sector – demands from Welsh Government, pots of money to be spent quickly, unions, internal and external pressures. We need to have something systematic and planned.'* (Focus Group participant).

Other participants argued that the health and wellbeing of middle and senior managers had not been given sufficient attention during the pandemic:

*'The focus during the pandemic was on learners and staff. There had been less emphasis on middle and senior leaders. We need to create time to reflect on what we went through.'* (Focus Group participant).

In general leaders argued however that despite the experience of the pandemic it had brought senior leadership teams together as they worked at pace in the face of adversity. A number of participants argued that they had supported each other through what were very difficult circumstances.

This should not underplay the significant impact of Covid-19 on the morale of those in senior leadership roles, which one described as being a 'weariness from the many phases of the pandemic'. Nor should it minimise that challenge of the current scale and pace of working. However, there is evidence to demonstrate the resilience of senior leadership teams during the pandemic.

*'The pandemic has brought us closer together as a senior team.'* (Senior leader interview participant).

*'We learned how dynamic we are as a college and how we can react to situations and in fact how we can look after each other.'* (Senior leader interview participant).

It is though undeniable that the pace at which leaders are working and the demands they are facing cannot be sustained. At the very least, this limits their capacity to effectively reflect and to plan for the future, including thinking how best to embed the learning and changes from the pandemic. It is likely that without action the pace of working and the level of demands on senior leaders will hinder the capacity of the sector to retain and recruit leaders in the future. It is an area that requires greater attention by the sector and by government.

## Conclusion

The research provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities for improving the quality of leadership in further education in order to continue delivering for learners, communities, and employers. There was a consensus around the challenges faced by colleges, including the need to improve development and progression for middle managers and to address specific inequalities of representation in the senior leader cohort.

There is consensus too that the challenges should be met in a collaborative way and through greater national coordination. Responsibility for change sits in part with Colegau Cymru but it must be shared too with other partners in the post-16 system, including the Welsh Government and the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research. Working together there is the opportunity to offer greater support for aspiring and current leaders and to ensure that the sector continues to have strong and effective leadership into the future.

## Annex

Examples of good practice emerged and were discussed as part of the research. One college provided more detailed information on the support they offer, which focuses on an ILM Level 5 and ILM Level 7 offer to staff. This information is provided below to give greater detail and depth to the earlier reference to this in the report.

### ILM Level 5 Award in Leadership and Management

The college encourages the development of the leadership skills within the organisation. Many staff have traditionally adopted additional roles working across their own schools but also across other schools and sites. They have embraced the role of programme and course coordinators, senior lecturers and mentors to new staff developing their skills in these roles via a range of in-house and external training. However, this is limited development, often working within a very narrow silo and without the understanding of the other departments.

The next step for these staff is to develop their leadership and management skills with the view to moving into the role of Deputy Head or junior/ middle management. To support this progression and without the suitable development available externally, the college developed a bespoke programme for these 'aspiring managers' which would provide the details of the various departments, help to build networks, provide team working, team leader skills, and senior leadership skills.

The aim was to provide a thorough understanding of each aspect of the college and to develop the initial management skills so that staff were able to advance to the role of junior / middle management. To accompany this development and to add further depth the ILM Level 5 Award in Leadership and Management was included with modules which focused on:

- Developing and Leading Teams and
- Becoming an Effective Leader.

The benefits to the individual were identified as:

- Develop the ability to lead, motivate and inspire to drive better results
- Use core management techniques to provide practical leadership and operational management skills
- Benchmark their own managerial capability against other professionals
- Raise the professional profile within the organisation
- Gain a thorough grounding in the roles and responsibilities of a junior or middle manager
- Focus on the development of interpersonal skills to effectively build relationships

- Communicate the organisations goals and values

The benefits to the organisation were identified as:

- Middle managers who understand their role and function with the organisation
- Middle managers who have a clear understanding of the wider organisational strategy
- Managers who have the understanding to develop their own leadership styles and behaviours

To provide this development a programme of delivery was prepared which would be delivered over a 6-month period with 16 sessions. These sessions addressed:

- The expectations of a manager within the college
- Presentation Skills
- Strategic Priorities
- O365 tools to support management
- Transform Education
- Quality Teaching & Learning Curriculum
- Creating a Safer Learning Community
- Fitness to Study and Wellbeing Support
- ALN Transformation
- Recruitment & Selection
- Performance Management
- Staff Development Wednesday
- Absence Management
- Marketing & Communications
- Budgeting, Commercial Awareness and the Business Development Unit
- Equality & Diversity (Impact Assessment)
- ILM Days x 4
- Project Management Projects & Funding

This ILM Level 5 module require the staff to complete two research studies on the key areas including a personal development plan which provides a focus for their individual development within the organisation, identifying any further development necessary to achieve their target.

The success in this programme is proven with approximately 50 staff having successfully achieved their ILM Level 5 Award, staff having advanced to the roles of middle management both within the college and externally. The final stage of this development is the sharing of this experience and qualification with another college. 5 of their staff have started to undertake the ILM alongside staff from the original college, providing opportunities for the reflection of the development and management and leadership skills in another institution.

### **ILM Level 7 Certificate in Leadership and Management**

Within any organisation there is a need to develop the skills and knowledge of the workforce. This is often focused on the lower-level skills and knowledge or application by organisations, but it is key to develop the leaders of the future should the organisation wish to grow.

*‘Leadership is about inspiring people to do things they never thought they could’* – Steve Jobs, Co-founder of Apple

But successful leadership also requires the skills and knowledge and therefore the training and development we would afford to other skills. With this as our target and progressing from the ILM Level 5 Award undertaken within the aspiring managers programme a wide range of qualifications and approaches was explored.

Due to the absence of any Leading Wales course and the previous Masters in Leadership and Management delivered via ColegauCymru, the college has shown a huge dedication and commitment to developing aspiring managers and developing leadership skills of their middle management. Hence why a ‘home-grown’ ILM 7 course was produced with the benefit of all the executive team contributing to its delivery. This allowed the courses to be ‘bespoke’ in nature and allow us to uniquely tailor it to our audience.

The Level 7 Certificate in Leadership and Management is designed for senior and middle managers and leaders who want to develop themselves as leaders and managers and advance to more senior roles within the organisation. To undertake the qualification, they are individuals who would recognise they have to satisfy various stakeholders and want to invest in their own personal brand.

In their current role they may manage day-to-day operations and activities, and in doing so seek to make best use of their resources, understand the need to innovate and have a constant awareness of the need to optimise performance. They may also have to present arguments for change, construct business cases, lead change implementation and evaluate the impact of that change. This qualification seemed to fit the development of our managers allowing them to expand their knowledge and skills but also the growth of the organisation.

The benefits to the individual were identified as:

- Knowing how to use an enquiry led evidence-based approach to develop their leadership and management capability
- Developing and enhancing their personal brand
- Developing, implementing, and evaluating high-level, strategic business cases
- Embedding their leadership and management development in real work

The benefits to the organisation were identified as:

- Senior leaders and managers who could think and act strategically
- Senior leaders and managers who make informed evidence-based decisions
- Motivated staff who can create and maintain a high-performance culture
- Senior team members who are self-aware and take responsibility for self-development

This would, hopefully, fulfil the demands of the future roles that managers would like to undertake within the organisation but also provide key skills in:

- Critical analysis
- Effective communication
- Emotional intelligence
- Vision – crucial for future growth and survival
- Accountability
- Motivation and delegation
- Guidance and support
- Confidence and morale boosting

The next stage, following approval to run the course from ILM, was to identify how it would be delivered and developed. The programme effectiveness was based around the delivery by key senior personnel who would provide the opportunity to discuss aspects of development. The candidates would be provided with a reading list to explore and details of the outline specifications.

Mentors would be implemented to support the assessment for the qualification which is in the form of one written enquiry-based research study of approximately 5000 words accompanied by a presentation reflecting candidate's own leadership and management development. The study can be drawn from the candidate's own area of interest grounded within leadership and management theories covered within the course content. Candidates will conduct structured research into personal and organisational performance and apply their findings to develop their own and organisational performance.

This research study was to be agreed by the course developer and the Vice Principal Operational Services and to be a 'live' topic, the findings of which could be implemented in the organisation, should it be thought appropriate.

The candidates would also be required to present their research findings and recommendations to the senior management team.

The course content was outlined over 6-day sessions over a 6-month period as follows and was delivered on a hybrid basis:

- Course Induction: Purpose, content, assessment, and support.
- Leaders and Managers: strategic and operational, from leader to leadership - reflecting on own college roles and practices
- Current Models of Leadership: Leadership styles.
- College Leadership 1: College Structure, Leadership Capabilities, Leadership Roles
- Leading and Managing Innovation and Change: Theory and Practice
- College Leadership 2: Accountability, Engaging Stakeholders
- Undertaking Research: The Research Question, Methodology
- Research Skills and Support: resources and referencing.
- Assessment: Role of the Mentor

The candidates would use a reflective journal to provide details of their own thoughts on the key points raised in the session, the relevance to their current role, details of any associated reading around the topic area, any further development which could be visualised following this either on a personal basis or from a college perspective. Details of how the information could be applied to the chosen project area and how this could shape the development of the individual are also included in the reflective journals.



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