



FE and Skills Survey 2016

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INTRODUCTION

'The Great FE & Skills Survey of 2016' was conducted by the Policy Consortium ¹ as a follow-up to those we conducted over a similar period in 2014 and 2015. Members of the Policy Consortium contributed their time and resources to devise, analyse and report on the survey. For more information about us and to access our reports and strategy documents, do visit our [website](#). This report provides an overview of the process, key findings and comparisons with results from last year's survey.

We wish to acknowledge the valuable support of FE Week, our media partner in this venture. FE Week supported the dissemination of the survey instrument and has reported on some of the key findings. The Policy Consortium appreciates the time and effort of all who responded to this latest survey. Thank you.

Approach

The third annual survey was opened for responses on Friday 8th April 2016 and closed on Friday 29th April 2016 – incorporating one week's extension from the date originally indicated for closure. Even including that extra week, this was a somewhat shorter period for response than in 2015.

Using an online survey tool, the questions were designed to explore views of people with an interest in the FE sector on a range of relevant topics from government policy to teaching resources, curriculum change to staff morale, partnerships to inspection. Respondents were also offered the chance to express opinions on issues of their choice that we had not considered when devising the questions. A final, open ended, question asked for views on the single most important issue affecting further education and skills.

The questions and themes were very similar to the initial survey conducted in [2014](#) and that in [2015](#) to facilitate comparisons one year on. New questions were included in 2016 on the apprenticeship reforms, area reviews and devolution. The closed responses within individual questions invited participants to express their level of concern on a scale from 'not at all concerned' to 'extremely concerned'. There were also many opportunities for open ended contributions.

Within the 11 themes, survey participants were invited to respond to 88 separate issues. These were ranked by level of concern and the top ten ranking is reported in the executive summary below, with the full ranking in annex 1.

¹ The Policy Consortium is a group of experienced people with strong and varied track records in UK further education and skills. We work together and individually. Our clients include providers of education and training, sector organisations, and government agencies. We formed the consortium in 2006, though several of us have been working independently for longer than this. Between us we have a very wide range of expertise and experience, as managers, journalists, researchers, evaluators, mentors, and policy and strategy advisors.

Respondents

By the survey closing date, 731 responses had been submitted (a very slight increase of about 1.1% from 2015's total of 723). This is encouraging; possible 'dampening factors' such as ever-increasing demands on colleagues' time and attention, 'survey fatigue' and even potential cynicism or despair might well have produced a lower rate of participation in this survey than in 2015.

However, as with the first two years, not all of these responses were complete ones, answering in some way all of the questions appearing on all web-pages of the survey. This year, 71.0% of responses were complete – a decline from 75.9% in 2015.

The total nevertheless makes for a significant basis on which to analyse and comment with some confidence, as a reasonable sample. However, it should be noted that its degree of representativeness is limited, as it was not a scientifically-chosen sample and no weighting has been attempted.

Considering the matter of participation trends more closely, there is close year-on-year comparability with the profiles of the 2014 and 2015 surveys' participants, in the proportions represented by:

- current main job role/level in the further education and skills sector
- current employment status in the sector
- length of experience in the sector
- nature of the organisations with which they were primarily associated or employed, if any.

Full analysis of these areas (which constituted Questions 1 to 4), for this year's survey and the patterns over all three years, is given in Annex 2. In addition, a brief summary and analysis of Question 33, regarding the ways in which participants discovered and accessed the survey is given in Annex 3.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary outlines the nature of the respondents to the survey, highlights the top ten areas of concern and also includes a discussion of the responses to two final questions in the survey *'what, in your view, is the single biggest issue currently affecting FE and skills? And, new in 2016 'What gives you the biggest cause for optimism in FE and skills over the coming year?'*

Without claiming statistical validity, the 723 respondents to the 2015 survey appear to be from a broad cross section of the sector. About half described themselves as managers; a further 10% as chief executives; 20% administrative or support staff and 10% tutors or lecturers. About two thirds were from colleges with others from training providers, adult and community learning, local government and support

agencies. About half had been in the sector for 13 years or more, so were well able to put recent cuts in context.

There is considerable similarity between the top concerns in 2016 and 2015. The top ten in 2016 are given in Table 1 and the full list of rankings in Annex 1.

Institutional and learner funding feature again as the top two areas with the highest level of concern with another 3 areas shared with last year's top ten. External bureaucracy is still in the top five, suggesting little reduction in the demands being placed on the sector by funding agencies, policy makers and others. This is reinforced by the two new topics related to the apprenticeship reforms featuring in the 2016 top 10.

Table 1: Top 10 topics by level of concern in 2016

The survey tool calculates an 'average level of concern' using a score as follows: none: 0; somewhat: 1; moderate: 2; extreme: 3. If every respondent indicated that they were extremely concerned about a topic then this would generate the maximum score of 3. N/A responses were not counted in calculating the average level of concern.

Theme	Topic	2015 top 10 Rank	average level of concern 2016
Funding	Levels/rates of institutional funding	1	2.56
Funding	Adequacy of learner funding	2	2.47
Policy	Broad government 'direction of travel' for FE and skills	7	2.38
Funding	Funding for growth		2.36
Funding	External bureaucracy	3	2.36
Policy	Reform of Apprenticeships	New	2.28
Staffing	Staff workload	4	2.28
Employer Engagement	Potential impact of the apprenticeship levy	New	2.27
LEPs	Status of FE and skills providers		2.23
Policy	Sector complexity (e.g. BIS/DfE boundary)		2.22

376 people responded to the open ended question 'What, in your view, is the single biggest issue currently affecting FE and skills?' The top five issues are given in table 2.

Table 2: Top 5 issues affecting FE and Skills from open ended responses

Single biggest issue affecting FE & Skills	% (rounded)
Funding	39.
Apprenticeship Reforms	16
Government Policy	11
Sector Reputation	9
Area Reviews	6

The responses, to a large extent, reflected the ranking in table 1 and last year's concerns.

Funding issues were often put in the context of the Area Based Reviews and also devolution, especially in relation to the Adult Education Budget. Attention was also drawn to funding inequities between schools and HE and disproportionate reductions for FE, often allied to a lack of recognition for the sector. Funding issues were often seen as making any long, or even medium term, planning impossible. This was compounded by the uncertainty caused by Area Reviews making it difficult to recruit to jobs in the sector.

Tensions between government funding and policy priorities were frequently referred to particularly in relation to the apprenticeship reforms. Here the target for starts was seen as unrealistic and likely to drive behaviour that could reduce the quality of an apprenticeship. Particular issues are likely to impact on public organisations, for example, local authorities with shrinking workforces being required to meet the apprenticeship target. Issues relating to the importance of SMEs were often raised especially related to their lack of involvement in apprenticeship standards development.

The concerns about funding and apprenticeship reforms were grounded in disquiet about Government policy with phrases like ‘mistrust of the sector’, ‘desire to kill off the sector’, and the impact of ‘constant meddling’ all adding to the raft of concerns in table 2.

There were 323 responses to the final question: *What gives you the biggest cause for optimism in FE and skills over the coming year?* 27 separate topics were identified with a broad spread of responses. The top five responses are given in Table 3

Table 3: the top 5 causes for optimism

Cause for Optimism	% (rounded)
Learners/Students	14
Apprenticeships	11
Sector responsiveness	11
Staff resilience	11
Funding	6

The responses to this question were often phrased in the form ‘I would be optimistic if it wasn’t for ...’ However the importance of FE in making a difference to people’s lives came through most strongly with a particular focus on the disadvantaged and hard to reach. Staff were described as having a passion ‘despite everything’ for helping learners to succeed. Tribute was often paid to the motivation and enthusiasm of the learners themselves.

The 11% of respondents who were optimistic about the apprenticeship reforms drew attention to the growth opportunities and the raising of the profile of a neglected training route. There was a feeling that the levy would enhance employer engagement. Increased awareness of the ‘brand’ was also seen as significant especially in creating high status alternatives to degrees.

Although it was clear that the challenges are greater than ever before, there was some optimism that the 'resilience' of the staff, leaders and managers would serve the sector well in dealing with the changes to come.

FINDINGS

1 FUNDING

It is perhaps not surprising that once again the level of institutional funding tops the list of concerns for those responding to this survey. With almost two thirds reporting that they were extremely concerned and just over 90% either extremely or moderately concerned the pattern of responses is very close to that observed last year and indicates that fears on this score remain higher than those of two years ago. The fact that this years' funding settlement for FE was not nearly as bad as had been trailed seems to have done little to reassure staff in the sector though one single comment swam against the general tide

"I am much less anxious about finance and funding than 12 months ago. The multi-year funding framework put in place last November is v welcome, as is the higher funding rate for land-based colleges."

Once again it is worth making the point that while concern about overall levels of funding, and levels of funding per learner remain high, respondents are not uniformly concerned about everything. Even in relation to funding there are several areas where concerns overall are best described as moderate; fewer than a fifth for example report themselves extremely concerned about travel to learn subsidies and only 22% about learning loans. There are even lower levels of reported concern in other parts of the survey.

One might have expected concerns about learning loans to have grown as a higher proportion of government support for the sector is switched from grant to loan. That has not happened with the proportion reporting moderate or extreme concern remaining at 54% - exactly the same figure as last year. One might have expected the transfer of FE Capital funding to LEPs to have triggered greater concerns but the proportion reporting extreme or moderate concern actually fell slightly (from 65% to 63%)

Apart from a generalised fear of not having enough resource to carry out a decent job the two big fears that underlie sector worries seem to be bureaucracy and uncertainty, often linked together. The comments made by respondents are dominated by these two factors, crystallising around the two big unknowns – how will the employer levy and other changes to apprenticeships play out; and what will be the impact of the clearly anticipated but ill-defined move towards local control of FE budgets.

Comments on the former spoke of the difficulty of engaging with employers when so much was still unclear. One said that the

'Levy is not that far away and there are still too many unknowns';

another wondered

'how non-levy payers will access funding'

and a third stated

'There is no clarity regarding how both levy paying and in particular, SME employers engage in apprenticeships',

The worries were expressed by staff from colleges, training providers and a sector skills council. The concerns about the bureaucratic burden arising from the levy was best summed up by the respondent who observed

In a year's time we will potentially be having to deal with four different funding streams at once - framework funding, Trailblazer funding, levy funding for large employers, unknown system for smaller employers

Worries about the impact of local control of budgets were also expressed by several and heightened by experience with the transfer of special needs funding. One said

'The main issue is around the EHCP plans and the lack of funding from local County Councils'.

Another explained at greater length

'We are finding it very difficult to plan our Additional Learning Support work and there are increasing numbers of young people who are coming into the sector who are not benefiting from the support they need because it is unaffordable. The most critical are being 'shelved' for funding by LAs in a manner that is not conducive to good, planned support and choice for the learner/carer'.

Also of concern was the capability and impartiality of LEPs. According to one comment

'The LEPs appear to be self serving'

Another referred to

'uncertainty as to the respective roles of LEPs and new local authorities with devolved powers on skills'.

The observation that there were *'Diverse funding models complicating daily life'* helps explain why over four fifths of those returning the survey highlighted external bureaucracy as of moderate or extreme concern.

2 COLLABORATION AND COMPETITION

As in previous years, respondents were concerned about the competitive landscape in which they operate. It is not, however, the competition itself which seems to be the root cause of concern but rather the confusions in the landscape and the variable quality of provision across different providers and provider types. 57% were moderately or extremely concerned about their competitive position and 59% about the range and quality of that provision. To a large extent this mirrors the position in 2015 where many were concerned about the proliferation of providers, including ITPs and small school Sixth Forms.

In an ideal world, the Area Review process might have been expected to mitigate some of these concerns but in fact the majority of the comments made in this section were expressing grave concern, sometimes verging on alarm, about the Area Review process and, where these were known, the outcomes. Well over 60% of respondents expressed moderate or extreme concern about what they regarded as a flawed process. Not least among the reasons for this was that the complex competitive landscape described in the 2015 survey remained largely untouched by a review process which excluded much local post-16 provision, including Sixth Forms, ITPs and voluntary sector providers.

'Any Area Review which does not look at the totality of provision in areas... isn't a full area review. If the mega mergers mooted take place in FE we will be left with some unfeasibly large and potentially unmanageable behemoths across far too wide a geographic area to be effective. Quite how this sits with the Government's localism agenda for FE I cannot fathom.'

This view was echoed repeatedly by respondents in one way or another by those who had experienced, witnessed or merely anticipated the Review process.

'Area Review has set the willingness to work collaboratively back at least a decade. Principals, Boards and staff are fighting to retain their identities and, in some cases, their jobs. This has at best halted collaborative working and at worst focussed management attention away from our core business, the student.'

And the Review process itself was credited with blighting local provision:

'The Area Review process has created turmoil. Delayed outcomes and the creation of super colleges. Job losses guaranteed and learners faced with fewer options. Reduced provision and loss of talent with tutors leaving the industry.'

Accusations about the lack of local accountability and arbitrarily drawn review area boundaries surfaced repeatedly.

'The focus of an Area Review (Devon and Cornwall) which spans two LEP areas does not make any sense and makes LEP links into future local funding at best extremely difficult.'

Moving on from the destructive forces unleashed by the Review process itself, many also expressed concern about the consequential damage to provision and learner life chances of the post-review landscape.

'The whole process is finance driven. The talk about local provision is a joke – there will be fewer centres offering certain qualifications, so students will have to travel further.'

This concern that the needs of learners were low on the Review process agenda was widely shared. The potential effects of centralising or editing provision were alluded to again and again by respondents and are most succinctly summarised by one comment:

'I believe that the outcome of many reviews will result in mergers and/or redistribution or rationalisation of delivery. The result...is that the range of courses available will be reduced and travel to study to receive training will increase for many, making it an impossibility given current family and financial pressures. Bigger is definitely not always better.'

This was echoed by the person who wrote:

'I feel with the level of collaboration being 'encouraged' the identities of smaller niche providers will be lost in the giant institutes. It is often the uniqueness of providers which makes them successful.'

Finally, concerns remained about the variability in quality of provision with more than 60% of respondents moderately or extremely concerned about this issue. One called for a 'whistleblowing hotline' to report concerns about questionable practices to an independent body 'as the SFA are not interested.' Apprenticeship provision in particular was frequently singled out for criticism with training seen not just as variable in quality between providers but also subject to wild variations within providers from time to time.

3 STAFFING

Pay and Conditions

Although there are clearly concerns about pay and conditions, these are in the mid-range of concerns with 12% of respondents not at all concerned, with 32.6% moderately concerned and 35.6% extremely concerned.

'Rates of pay have fallen a LONG way behind inflation - salaries are now, in general, below the market'

The 2016 Survey does not give details of the type of person responding, so it is impossible to know among which staff, concerns about pay and conditions, predominate.

One comments illustrated the difficulties that some colleges face in terms of recruitment of staff:

'Difficult to pay for qualified maths and English teachers or tutors with existing maths and English funding'

Motivation

Staff motivation is the second highest concern of respondents. 47.5% are extremely concerned about the issue and 28.6% moderately concerned. Staff morale seems to have worsened dramatically when compared with the figures for staff motivation in the 2014 and 2015 Survey when a third of responses were moderately or extremely concerned. In 2016 the figures for moderately or extremely concerned is 76.1% of the responses.

'I am surprised that the staff here have still got some motivation after all the cuts we have been through and the threat of more cuts and mergers. We may be running on fumes right now but it seems to be working'

'Anecdotally, staff morale is extremely low in local colleges due to mass redundancies, increased workload and expectations, the reliance on business consultancy companies and implementation of often unsuitable procedures. This has led to a high turnover of staff in all departments.'

'Front line staff demoralised.'

'The morale across the sector is the lowest I have witnessed.'

Workload

Workload is the staffing issue that gives rise to the greatest concern. 51.5% of responses reported that they were extremely concerned and 79.9% are moderately or extremely concerned. This replicates the results on workload in both the 2014 and 2015 Surveys. It seems that concerns over workload have increased in 2016. Workload is also feeding negatively into retention and the morale of staff.

'FE staff are at breaking point. More work expected for the same or less pay. Work/Life balance is poor.'

'Reduction in funding means staff have to do more for less'

'Our brilliant staff are being asked to do a great deal, and this may increase.'

'We cut each year but the workload does not reduce.'

Retention/turnover

This issue rates as the 3rd highest concern after staff motivation and workload. However, over 10% said they are not at all concerned. 65% of those completing the 2016 Survey are moderately and extremely concerned. Compared with the 2014 and 2015 results on this issue, there is increasing concern.

'I do worry that with new funding and reforms that this will have a negative effect on work load and motivation and in turn change our otherwise low turnover of staff to an increased one in the future.'

'Our college has lost almost all of its experienced teachers in the last 18 months. Some have left to go to other colleges, but more have gone on to other work-- they view FE teaching as an impossible profession after having dedicated their lives to it.'

'There are real issues about the recruitment and retention of staff in some industry sectors.'

Competition (for finding and retraining staff) from other sectors/industry

This does not seem to be as pressing an issue as it did in the 2014 and 2015 Surveys. In the 2016 Survey this is seen as a medium level concern. Two thirds of responses say they are moderately and extremely concerned. In the 2014 and 2015 Surveys there were substantial majorities expressing moderate and extreme concern on competition from unplanned expansion and competition from UTCs free schools and academies. In the 2015 Survey there were worries about the proliferation of providers and small school 6th forms. There were worries about the recruitment practices of private providers and academies. Some were alarmed by arrival of mega-providers sub-contracting to cheaper providers – 'race to the bottom. Despite current Area Reviews and college mergers, this did not appear in any of the respondents' comments on this issue.

Availability of opportunities and budgets for staff training

This rates as a middle ranking concern in the 2016 Survey, although almost 70% are moderately or extremely concerned. As there are no figures indicating which staff made responses to this question, it is impossible to know if the 2014 survey which showed more concern from teachers than from managers is repeated in the 2016 Survey. The 2014 Survey also reported that there was some concern over the erosion of teacher training budgets. And that decreasing remission meant that staff development was often in the staff's own time. This has not occurred in any of the comments in the 2016 Survey.

'I am concerned that Senior Managers are so focussed on changes with Funding rules and with Area Reviews that they do not have the time or budget to adequately train and develop support personnel and to encourage succession management.'

'Recruitment of specialist English and maths tutors is difficult. In addition, there is no training'

Age profile of workforce

From the responses to this question, the age profile of the sector workforce seems to be seen as less of a problem than in the past. The question scored the 2nd lowest rating of this Section. Almost 31% are not at all concerned about the workforce age profile and over 44% moderately and extremely concerned. This may mean that the point has been reached when large numbers of staff are well below the age of retirement. The 2014 Survey had comments on the lack of promotion opportunities for older workers and that the more experienced and so expensive were more liable to be made redundant. The 2015 Survey demonstrated similar concerns and that there was an aging workforce in some subjects.

'There is an age problem where there are many experienced staff retiring (myself included) within the next few years.'

'Older generation seems to be getting out of the sector prior to these new rules coming into force'

Diversity of the workforce

The responses to this question demonstrates how much equality and diversity has fallen from the FE agenda. 39% of responses said they are not at all concerned with the issue and only 9% said they were extremely concerned. This is the same figure for extremely concerned about work force diversity in the 2015 Survey. The one comment on diversity of the workforce spoke about the lack of diversity of senior staff

'Diversity at senior/chief exec level remains a significant issue.'

Skills and qualifications of support staff

This issue is low on the list of concerns, perhaps reflecting longer term neglect of support staff in the FE and Skills Sector. 30% of responses are not concerned at all about support staff skills and qualifications. Just under 31% are moderately extremely concerned and 12% extremely concerned. This is an increase on the responses to this question in 2014 when about 25% were not at all concerned and 9.5% were extremely concerned. The 2016 responses however are a decrease from the 2015 responses when 36.7% were not at all concerned and 52.8% moderately/extremely concerned with extremely concerned 5.9%.

The only comment about support staff skills and qualifications stated that support staff are disadvantaged because they don't have a teaching qualification

'As a support staff member, unfortunately it's clear that those without teaching qualifications are verging on being classed as second class citizens in FE.'

without a teaching qualification there seems to be little or no options in terms of career progression for support staff.

Skills and qualifications of teaching/training staff

There seems to be a low level of concern about staff skills and qualifications. 22.6% of responses are not at all concerned, 25.4% moderately concerned and 15.7% extremely concerned. The responses to this question in the 2014 Survey also rated the concerns as low. Where there was concern, it was in relation to technological developments. There were also concerns about Initial Teacher Training because of the de-regulation of initial teacher training qualifications in 2013. The 2015 responses were higher than those of 2016. It may be that the 2016 responses reflect that with the passage of time since the deregulation of the requirements around staff qualifications, some of the concerns are dissipating. The comments made referred to apprenticeships and the lack of training to develop new English and Maths teachers.

'Still way too many learner facing delivery staff unable to cover all elements of an apprenticeship framework to effectively embed all elements into joined up learning approaches. Many still function as assessors or tutors with low levels of confidence and skills outside of straight forward assessment

'Recruitment of specialist English and maths tutors is difficult. In addition, there is no training available to develop new tutors.'

Staff flexibility

Staff flexibility did not rate highly on the list of concerns around staffing in the 2016 Survey. 23.4% are not at all concerned, with 15% extremely concerned and 41.7% moderately/extremely concerned and somewhat/moderately concerned are 59% of responses. This is a little surprising given the debates and discussions around new roles in the FE and Skills sector. In 2014 staff flexibility was the 2nd rated concern with 25.7% being extremely concerned, although the figure from the 2015 Survey does show an increase in those extremely concerned, 22.2% in 2015 and 15% in 2016. There is one negative comment made on staff flexibility but this is a little offset by one positive comment.

'Staff do not realise they need to be flexible in their ways of working in the current climate. There is no such thing as routine anymore and they will have to adapt to meet the changes that are introduced in order for an employer to be successful'

'I think our staff are, generally, doing a wonderful job at a very, very difficult time. I still see them going the extra mile for students and for the good names of the college.'

Specialist teachers e.g. English & Maths, Vocational Subjects

With the requirement for young people and apprentices to have or be on en-route to an ALevel qualifications in English and Maths, it is unsurprising that this issue is of great concern to respondents. It is the issue that is rated of 3rd highest concern in the

2016 Survey. 64.5% are moderately/extremely concern with 38.7% expressing extreme concern, although this is slightly lower than the 2015 figures for those expressing extreme concern which was 42.6%. The comments made illustrate some of the difficulties around English and Maths specialists and for teachers/trainers in vocational areas.

2014: *'difficult to attract specialist staff because pay lagging behind schools Pay rates for non-education vocational specialists having impact on recruiting vocational staff. Concern about recruiting high quality English and Maths teachers.'*

2015: *'not concerned 9.9% somewhat/moderately 42.5% 42.6% extreme concern'*

'It is very difficult if not impossible to find good maths and English GCSE teachers. When you do have them, they are under extreme pressure to achieve good outcomes for students who have not achieved previously. 'school' focussed GCSEs are not appropriate for the post-16 sector'

'Difficult to pay for qualified maths and English teachers or tutors with existing maths and English funding'

'English and maths teaching will be a continuing problem for the foreseeable future.'

'There are real issues about the recruitment and retention of staff in some industry sectors.'

Staff performance management

This is rated as of low concern overall. Those stating they are not at all concerned is high just under 20%. Those stating this issue is of somewhat/moderate concern is 57.4%, moderate/extreme concern comes to 48% and those expressing extreme concern is 20.3%. In 2014 there were negative comments from managers and teachers who was felt there were increasingly different priorities. This was making setting common aims and objectives difficult. It was felt performance management was increasingly aggressive. Those saying they were extremely concerned was the same as in 2016. In 2015 the percentage of those rating somewhat/moderately concern was 62.7%, and those extremely concerned was below that of 2016 at 15.7%

'In my experience, performance management is very varied and when poor management is not dealt with it has a much wider impact than the effect it has on the learner. A greater focus should be put on training managers in performance management.'

Succession for leadership and management

This was ranked of middling concern overall. Those not concerned were 16.2%, those moderately/extremely concerned 9.3% and extremely concerned 28.63%. The 2014 and 2015 overall ratings were higher than that of 2016. Both the 2 comments posted were concerned at the lack of many management development programme which would have an impact on succession planning.

'The absence of a proper management development programme for senior managers/chief execs is a significant concern.'

'I am concerned that Senior Managers are so focussed on changes with Funding rules and with Area Reviews that they do not have the time or budget to adequately train and develop support personnel and to encourage succession management.'

'If we don't invest in our leaders and managers and ensure they have the information, skills and ability to get the best out of their teams and adapt in an ever-changing FE environment then we will continue to have problems.'

Quality of managers

This ranks at a medium to low position overall. The figure for those not concerned at all is 18.1% and those extremely concerned at 26.5%. It is difficult to make comparisons with 2014 and 2015 because in those surveys the questions asked about middle and senior managers separately. The figures on the actual rankings in both the 2014 and 2015 Surveys were very similar to those in 2016, except for the percentage of those ranking the issue extremely concerning. The 2016 figure had increased this category by over 9%.

Quality of leaders

Analysing the 2016 responses there is more concern about the quality of leaders. The percentage of those not concerned was in the mid-range of concerns at 19.2%, as was the ranking of those extremely concerned at 35.3%. The figures of the quality of senior managers in the 2014 and 2015 Surveys was broadly similar to those in the 2016 Survey. The comments posted for this issue perhaps show the depth of feeling that there can be around this.

'My college has very poor leadership. The principle is not visible at all and we are going through yet another restructure with no thought for growth or quality.'

'The senior management at my FE College are nothing short of bullies and think bullying staff and under paying them is the best way to motivate them.'

It seems to me that many FE colleges are poorly led with poor staff and the sector needs to be flushed out and given a blood transfusion of new, more able and dedicated people.

'Senior leaders are too busy with external things to be involved in what's happening within college.'

'The morale across the sector is the lowest I have witnessed. The pressure has led to poorer provision and leaders are not equipped to deal with the daily changes imposed by funding cuts and lack of clarity of the areas review. FE will continue to decline under these pressures.'

Communications with staff

This has a medium overall rating. Just over 14% are not at all concerned. The percentages for the other 3 categories are around 27-29% each. This is similar to the results in the earlier surveys.

'The primary issue for staffing is the lack of communication from management. The secondary one is the ignoring of staffing issues such as not enough staff to cover all lessons.'

'In my experience, there seems to be little communication between managers and staff, and I am not convinced that the managers even have the knowledge to run successful post-16 learning and training organisations.'

4 CURRICULUM

Pace and volume of curriculum change

Unsurprisingly at a time when A levels, GCSEs and vocational qualifications are all in the middle of great changes, this issue rates as the 2nd highest level of concern in this section of questions. Just over a third are moderately or extremely concerned. Its 2016 rating is lower than in 2014 when it was the highest concern. In 2015 the pace and volume of curriculum change when 44% of responses were extremely concerned. This is perhaps a reflection of the timing of the Surveys and the announcement of the curriculum changes. This is reflected in one view posted:

'I suppose the changes at the moment make us all feel that we are treading water with regards to the new curriculum delivery and until it is embedded it will be a challenge to know how to plan for our own delivery.'

One comment cast doubt on the necessity of some of the changes to vocational programmes.

'Constant changes to curriculum every few years is quite destabilising. Introduction of external assessment on level 3 vocational courses will not necessarily make the qualifications more robust; in the main many were already fit for purpose and helped learners develop skills, knowledge and understanding appropriately and prepare them for University or progression into work/further training.'

Another was less tolerant of concerns over the pace and volume of (vocational) curriculum change

'The new curriculum should not be a challenge but the FE college sector have got to get more commercial to compete with training providers and employers that are also operating in their trading space.'

One comment summed up the feelings of at least some very succinctly

'Reform = Cuts. Cuts = Pressure: Pressure = Poor provision. The sector cannot keep up with the pace of reform.'

Reform of Apprenticeships

Given that the 2016 Survey went out at the height of the various changes to apprenticeships but when still there was much in the changes which is still uncertain, it is not a shock that reform of apprenticeships was far and away the greatest concern of respondents in this section. Those who were not concerned at all are the lowest at 4.4%. Those expressing extreme concern was just under 50% at 49.5% and an additional 26.9% were moderately concerned. Comparisons with the 2014 and 2015 Surveys are not possible because as the 2015 Survey Report said there is 'not enough information on the new Apprenticeship system', and although the 2014 Survey Report mentioned that there were worries about the possible lack of flexibility in potential Government plans for both traineeships and the then new apprenticeships trailblazer frameworks, these had not coalesced into measurable concerns.

From the many comments on apprenticeships, there is a range of concerns that the apprenticeship standards are not an improvement over the frameworks and are producing a very complex system. There were also some criticisms of the government's direction of travel with the apprenticeship changes.

'The changes to apprenticeships are vast, already considerably behind schedule and in my opinion misguided. I think the Levy is ill-thought out, the new Standards extremely variable in quality, and the assessment model questionable. But I do welcome the basic premise of the vocational progression 'routes', even if I'm cynical about its translation into practice.'

'Apprenticeship standards are no improvement over frameworks and pass responsibility to the employers (who largely don't want it). Too complex a system with too many variations. I fear for those who are successful in their apprenticeship standard when the system changes again in the near future (it will change). They could be like another generation left with an AVCE or a GNVQ.'

'The changes to apprenticeships are vast, already considerably behind schedule and in my opinion misguided. I think the Levy is ill-thought out, the new Standards extremely variable in quality, and the assessment model questionable.'

There are some comments on who should be delivering apprenticeships, with at least some FE college staff feeling left out.

'Apprenticeships should be delivered by specialists for maths, English & IT. Assessors /IQAs should assess the technical and practical knowledge. You wouldn't ask a surgeon/doctor to do anything else as they are the specialist, so why expect assessors to deliver the entire apprenticeship? Assessors /IQAs should be occupationally competent with at least 5 years' worth of experience in the sector.'

'Also IQA's role should be a separate role and not combined with assessing learners. if the UK are to drive up standards then the quality needs to be top notch and not as part of a combined role.'

My main concern over current changes, particularly for apprenticeships, is the lack of involvement that FE professionals have had, coupled with a huge lack of understanding of what apprenticeships are within the teams overseeing the changes. Hearing comments about how exciting it is that health and social care employers want to engage in apprenticeships as though it's a novelty leave me banging my head against the desk. Has anyone actually looked at what programmes are being delivered right now? Have they looked at what demand there is from employers and in which sectors? Imagining that we can churn out 3 million higher/degree apprentices in engineering and manufacturing is frankly ridiculous, although that seems to be the vision from government. The main difference between apprenticeships and degrees is that you have to be ACTUALLY DOING THE JOB to achieve an apprenticeship - it's no good just wanting to be able to study at a certain level or in a certain subject - without the opportunity to put skills into practice and demonstrate competence an apprenticeship cannot be achieved. There needs to either be a realization of this or a change to the system (which trailblazer does not seem to be doing).

There are concerns about assessment, especially end point assessment in the comments.

'It's ridiculous that end point assessments for Apprenticeships aren't further along yet. But overall I think change is needed and a good thing.'

'Employer cash contributions and over-complex assessment will kill off apprenticeships in small businesses.'

Higher Education provision

There was little concern about higher education provision expressed in the Survey. Perhaps there might have been more if there had been sight of the most recent Government publication on higher education, the White Paper, 'Success as a Knowledge Economy,' which was published on May 19th 2016. The percentage of those not at all concerned was high at 17%, although this was not the issue that had the highest figures for not concerned. The figure for those extremely concerned was low at 13.4%.

The one comment on higher education provision was very specific to the land based sector.

'On HE, the failure of BIS to reach a decision on a National Land-based College, and their confusion on the scale and role of IoTs (Institutes of Technology) is blighting development of HE strategy in the land-based sector.'

Complexity of the offer

This is ranked as a medium term concern. 10.3% of respondents are not concerned. 26.7 are extremely concerned and 33.6% are moderately concerned. This is lower than in 2014 when the complexity of the offer was the 3rd highest concern and 37% were extremely concerned. The 2015 Survey figures were a little above those of 2014. It may be that as the curriculum offer is being bedded in and more familiar that at least some of the concerns have been mitigated. However some of the comments posted demonstrated very real concerns.

'I am very concerned that the VERY IMPORTANT complexity in the qualification system is being destroyed by ministers who can't read a damn spreadsheet and seem intent on dumbing down vocational qualifications until there are only as many as there are A-level subjects. I don't even understand the argument? Why are lots of qualifications confusing? How would reinventing the Tomlinson Diploma work better this time? They didn't take off because, oh yes, they weren't specific enough so employers hated them, so learners got to do specific subjects instead.

'A complex situation - lot of information for students to gather and understand in order to make decisions. As a careers adviser I see patchy provision of high quality IAG to help students sort all this out.'

Resources for curriculum delivery (materials, equipment, etc)

This was a medium concern which is perhaps a little surprising given the level of cuts in providers which one assumes must have been felt in terms of curriculum resources. Just under 11% are not concerned at all and just over 24% were extremely concerned. This is below the level of concern reported in the 2014 Survey.

Personalised learning

How low do yesterday's bright ideas fall. Quite some way seems to be the answer from the ranking of personalised learning in the 2016 Survey. It has the lowest overall rating for this set of questions at 1.39. 18.3% are not concerned at all and there is the lowest score for those who are extremely concerned, just under 14%. There were no comments on personalised learning posted.

Learner self-guided/independent learning

The scores for this issue are very similar to those for personalised learning. It is 2nd lowest level of concerns. 17.4% are not concerned at all and only 16% are extremely concerned. The ratings for 2014 and 2015 are similar to those for 2016.

Maths and English assessment and capacity to deliver

With the requirement that all those without Level 2 skills and qualifications in English

and Maths have to continue with these subjects, and this being reinforced for 16-18s through the funding system, it is no surprise that is the 2nd highest in the list of concerns. Only 6.3% are not concerned at all. 26.7% are moderately concerned and 47.8% extremely concerned: again a high figure. This is a 7% increase on the 2014 figure for extremely concerned, and the same as in 2015. It is clear that this is a major on-going concern with serious implications for the implementation of government policy on this issue. This is aptly summarised in the comment:

'Whose bright idea was it to make maths and English subjects compulsory without first giving industry time to get sufficient staff trained to deliver it!! Now all providers are crying out for good Maths and English lecturers and having to pay over the odds salaries and give golden hellos to entice new recruits.'

Another comment makes the same point well as pointing out the demoralising effect on some learners of having to re-sit exams they have already failed before.

'The introduction of Maths and English resits for students achieving lower than grade C at GCSE has been a complete and utter failure.To essentially force students who have struggled with maths and English throughout school to continue taking these subjects as standalone modules, only serves to further increase their lack of confidence in their own ability. Many feel as though they are being punished for not being able to achieve a C grade. This is further compounded by the fact that there is a shortage in qualified FE maths and English tutors, so these subjects have been very poorly delivered to students. There seems to be very little real value to this new scheme.'

Some felt that schools are not doing enough in these subjects and that for vocational courses, functional skills would be a better option.

'GCSE maths and English should have been secured by schools before learners enter vocational courses, if they do not have this then functional maths and English relevant to their chosen vocational subject areas should be taught.'

'Maths and English also needs a massive rethink in work-based learning. I'm not sure of the answer, but if Training Providers need to start paying maths teachers £35,000 to work for them, this will massively push the cost of their provision up - if they pass that on to the employers, they won't pay, so you are excluding young people that haven't excelled in maths and English. Maybe make it much more of a priority in school that they really need a far higher % of people passing then - or let the ones that aren't academic study functional skills from start of Year 11.'

Others commented that there should be a range of Level 2 English and Maths qualifications, and not just GCSEs.

'I only wish colleges had discretion on GCSEs because this product does not suit all learners and we are being unfairly attacked by Ofsted and the government because we are not turning around 11 years of failure at school (and very often despite all sorts of hothousing tactics in school) in the space of 1-2 years and only 2 hours per week of lessons that aren't academic study functional skills from the start of Year 11.'

Making sense of the system of qualifications and pathways for new learners

This is rated a medium concern in the Survey. 8.5% not all concerned at all, 33.5% moderately concerned and 30.1% extremely. Some of the comments posted also reflected on the lack of high quality careers and IAG.

'A complex situation - lot of information for students to gather and understand in order to make decisions. As a careers adviser I see patchy provision of high quality IAG to help students sort all this out.'

'Teachers should not just be judged on the number of students that they have going on to university or college after school - if they are to be monitored this should include apprenticeships, traineeships and school leaver programmes. Careers advice and soft skills should also be a higher priority in schools - this way we can ensure that the next generation of young people entering into the workforce are aware of the opportunities available to them. This would ensure that young people are making an informed and realistic decision about their own future. The support of parents and teachers with this is critical.'

'The way curriculum is structured in terms of content is all about material and not about the skills to use and apply knowledge. This is inadequate in terms of preparing people for the 21st century'

Range and breadth of qualifications and progression routes

This is a low concern. 12.6% are not concerned at all. 35. Just under 22% are extremely concerned and 35.6% moderately concerned. No comments were posted on this issue.

Funding for enrichment

A mid-level concern: there are just under 13% who are not concerned at all. 26% are extremely concerned and another 30% moderately concerned. As this is principally a 16-19 issue, it would be interesting to see more breakdown of the responses, especially type of institution. The level of concern has dropped from that in the 2014 survey when concerns were expressed as to the lack of vision on enrichment and especially the lack of enrichment in work based learning. The few comments that were made point out the funding difference between schools and colleges.

'Funding for enrichment/ funding for schools sixth forms compared to college - it is not a level playing field. Schools receive more funding per head, which enables enrichment opportunities.'

Assessment methods

This is a lower concern. 16.3% are not concerned and the figure for extremely concerned is low at just under 20%. However a majority of responses, that is those moderately or extremely concerned was a majority of responses at 53.3%. This is slightly that in 2014 when 49% were moderately/extremely concerned and lower than the 2015 figure. The comments posted are about assessment in apprenticeships.

'Employer cash contributions and over-complex assessment will kill off apprenticeships in small businesses'

'It's ridiculous that end point assessments for Apprenticeships aren't further along yet.'

'..the new Standards extremely variable in quality, and the assessment model questionable.'

'Worried about end point assessment and how it will work'

Workplace training

This is a medium level concern. 16.3% are not concerned at all. 21.11 are extremely concerned although 52.7% are moderately/extremely concerned. There were far less comments posted than in 2014 or 2015.

'Employer commitment continues to be an issue for many'

'For young people over the age of 13, more time needs to be spent in work preparation and work experience so that there is closer integration of the world of work and the world of learning. The pace of change requires those who teach and train to be given more support so they themselves can keep up to date. We require greater movement of people in this role from educational institutions into the work place and vice versa.'

Work experience

This is a medium level concern. 12.5% had no concerns and 27.2% are extremely concerned. Roughly a third of the responses went to each of the levels of concern. The 2016 figures seem to show a decrease in the amount of concerns when compared with the 2014 and 2015 results. However the figures are belied by the number and depth of feeling expressed in the posted comments.

'Employers also need to be actively encouraged to open their doors to young people for insight and taster activities, as well as work experience placements so that young people can find out more about the career opportunities available.'

'Work experience is a mess as to what counts. Bureaucratic and inconsistent. Tick the box stuff.'

'Work experience can be gained in college. However, a perennial problem with workplace placement for my students (theatre production) is Health and safety/insurance. Theatres are unable to offer anything other than shadowing opportunities to students under 18. If the government wishes (correctly) to encourage work experience some sort of temporary government funded insurance scheme should be introduced.'

'We have an extremely good record of vocational work experience but we are very concerned by the expectations regarding A level students and work experience to be 'found' by provider. An almost impossible ask.'

'It is proving extremely difficult to get 'buy-in' from employers for work experience in our sector. In addition, our learners normally all have part-time jobs, so they struggle to accept (the view espoused by employers/DfE nationally) that they don't have experience of the workplace!'

'Very few companies now willing to offer work experience, particularly SMEs, as all of them are working on minimum staffing levels and can no longer offer the supervision required.'

There is an interesting comment made about work experience when part of a Study Programme which calls for some form of external monitoring and quality assurance.

'The use of work experience in Study Programmes varies from one institution to another. It is an excellent mandatory part of the programme but should be externally monitored to ensure that it is being put in place for all full time learners. There needs to be some quality monitoring to ensure that the work experience placement has been selected appropriately and that it is offering a valuable development opportunity in terms of employability skills.'

5 TEACHING/TRAINING LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

Student capability and preparedness to learn and student behaviour

As in previous surveys, the greatest level of concern with teaching/training, learning and assessment was with student capability and preparedness to learn. The level of concern has increased this year with over half of those answering the question extremely (29%) or moderately (34%) concerned and 88% expressing some level of concern. Only 8% were not at all concerned, the lowest rating in this section. Although various comments were made, no consistent explanations emerged from the responses.

Student behaviour was a concern to three quarters of respondents. In terms of those who were moderately or extremely concerned, this ranked highest at 61%. One respondent linked student behaviour and preparedness to learn with the raising of the participation age.

'Raising the participation age has given us many students who traditionally would have dropped out, and whilst I welcome the opportunity to work with them for a longer time, in a different environment, many really don't want to be in a classroom and are disengaged, displaying poor behaviour and disrupting the learning

experience of those that have chosen to be here. Teachers are working extremely hard to re-engage young people but it is a hard task.'

Other comments echoed this concern, referring to FE as a 'dumping ground' for 'unteachable' school students.

Learner motivation and engagement

The second highest levels of concern expressed overall, unsurprisingly, were with learner motivation and engagement, an area closely related to student capability and preparedness to learn. 85% expressed concern and just over half of these concerns were moderate or extreme (53%)

Mention was made of students studying for GCSE maths and English who were sometimes neither motivated nor prepared for learning. Learner resilience was called into question,

'Learners need to understand that they can't 'dip out' of a programme on a whim, or if the work is too hard. They need to understand that life is hard and just get on with doing their best to achieve their qualification.'

One response linked learner engagement to unemployment levels and another to redundancies within the college:

'In our local region unemployment is higher than the National Average and student engagement is something that we struggle to manage.'

'The repercussions on Jobs as well as students learning, redundancies are already being given at my College. Which further hinders learning and procedural accuracies, policies and good practices'

Employer involvement in assessment

The third highest level of concern in relation to teaching/training, learning and assessment was with employer involvement in assessment. 82% of respondents expressed some level of concern with 59% extremely or moderately concerned. As one person wrote,

'Encouraging our employers to be a part of their apprentices' assessment is always a challenge.'

The main reasons cited were employer understanding, time and cost.

'Employers just don't understand what they are trying to do within apprenticeships.'

'Employers do not have the time to engage with learner assessment,' and 'Employers might object to the amount of time it might take for independent assessment and cost.'

'Employers need to be more supportive when learners sign up for programmes of learning, time with the assessors is not enough, they will also need time in the month to work on their assignments with access in the workplace to evidence and

discussion with their line manager or colleagues. Learners shouldn't have to see their assessor in their lunch hour or do all their written work at home.'

A further concern was that both employers and learners did not value the learning they were engaged in and as a result, *'success rates speak for themselves'*.

Some responses indicated that to address this concern, providers need to improve communications with employers and build a 'true partnership'.

Information advice and guidance (IAG)

Concern was clearly evident over the impact of poor quality information advice and guidance (IAG), which again elicited the greatest number of written comments. 77% expressed some level of concern, 49% extremely or moderately. The importance of impartial IAG was stressed and was linked to learner motivation.

'There are too many self serving institutions to make IAG truly neutral therefore IAG is failing the learner.'

'IAG is not always delivered or managed effectively and this, inevitability, will have a direct impact on the motivation and satisfaction of the learner. Clearly, it may also have an impact on retention and achievement. Unfortunately, IAG is not always independent and learner focused.'

The quality of IAG provided by schools was called into question.

'The biased and partial IAG which most young people are receiving at the moment from schools in particular is very concerning,' and *'Independent careers advice should not be provided by schools.'*

Although some stated that the 'dire state' of careers advice in schools was not their fault.

'Schools have had this dumped on them, through the demise of Connexions.'

Role and availability of ILT and other digital technologies

There has been little change in the levels of concern expressed over ILT compared to previous surveys, (78% registered some level of concern and just under half of these were moderate or extreme concerns 47%). There was one comment on the issue, which echoes the concerns expressed in previous surveys.

'The move to more 'on-line learning' will diminish the student experience. It is finance driven - it is not educationally sound.'

Learning support, feedback to learners and pastoral care and capacity to respond to the 'learner voice'

These two questions elicited the lowest overall levels of concern, as with previous surveys, at 73% and 71% respectively. A quarter were not at all concerned about the capacity to respond to the learner voice, the highest rating for 'not at all concerned'.

There were few comments on these topics although one response indicated a concern with the way in which learner voice information was used.

'the student voice is being misused to discipline staff and in some cases is methodologically unsound'

Another comment alluded to the current climate in FE and the impact it has on both staff and learners.

'Too many teachers these days are so confused about what they need to do for their students. They focus on getting them through the assignment/test, as that is what they think management want (and all too often they are right). Students learn to be good at passing tests and conforming. There is little evidence of a love of learning, and students developing the capacity to be happy, healthy, compassionate, resilient people'

On a positive note, one respondent indicated that appropriate management was the key to retaining the learner experience.

'Learner experience should remain if managed appropriately'

6 INSPECTION AND QUALITY

520 respondents answered this question relating to 'Inspection and Quality' and the respondents this year revealed higher levels of concern than previously with up to 86% expressing some degree of concern about: uncertainties and/or clarity of Ofsted criteria and emphases, the reliability of Ofsted inspection findings, changes to inspection approaches and the Common Inspection Framework. Reliability of inspection findings was the issue ranked 16th out of 87 responses in the survey.

The respondents' open ended comments showed some level of support for the concept of an external inspectorate. For example:

'As an ex Associate Inspector I have no issues with how the inspectorate operates'

I believe in external quality assurance and, given that it is public money, it is right that all education and training providers are inspected. With any inspection, it will depend on the area that is being inspected and there is always the potential for an area of poor provision to be overlooked if it does not come within the scope of the inspectorate at a given Ofsted inspection.

However, 43% of the respondents noted 'extreme concern' for the reliability of inspection. This was reflected in several comments, for example:

I don't see the inspection process as being fit for purpose. Grades across years are certainly not comparable, and even within years they are all over the place. Ofsted inspectors are sometimes hopelessly out of date, do not understand the technicalities and limitations of the data modelling on which they base their judgements (value added being a case in point).

Little confidence in Ofsted which is inconsistent and divorced from reality. It should stop pursuing its own agenda and return to policing compliance.

I do not consider OFSTED to be a reliable method of monitoring provider performance. They do not understand how FE Colleges operate and expect the FE sector to work exactly the same as compulsory education.

Having been heavily involved in 6 inspections (nominee, manager, practitioner etc) I have always found something positive and useful from the experience however the most recent, under the new CIF, was the most barbaric, brutal, piece of nonsense I have experienced. It was not about students or teaching and learning. There was an agenda as big as the elephant in the room.

Ofsted have inspected us recently and I found them not fit for purpose. They were not interested in the good but were more fault finding.

OFSTED is damaging FE rather than improving it.

In addition to the issues of validity and reliability some respondents reflected concerns about the inspection framework and its implementation and a need to focus on 'the right things'. For example:

The revised inspection framework is heavily prejudiced against those colleges, primarily GFEs, who recruit large numbers of students at FL and level 2 without GCSE maths and English and whose behaviour and life circumstances do not model public school A level students

Ofsted has served its time and is no longer fit for purpose. Rather than focussing on the positives, inspectors appear to have hidden agendas that only focus on the negatives resulting in the destruction of staff morale and learner achievement.

Inspection is such a high stakes process that many providers expend more time and energy on this than they do on simply getting things right for their learners. They are distracted from what should be their main focus because they are second guessing Ofsted and trying to find different ways to 'play the game'. If Ofsted was to be effective, it would be evaluating the right things.

Suffice it to say that we spend huge amounts of time and money measuring quality, and no time or money IMPROVING quality. And the instruments for measuring quality are deeply, deeply flawed. They do not give an accurate picture of classroom provision nor are they focussed on developing teaching staff.

Writing from an Adult and Community perspective one respondent raised the issues of the inspectorate's role in securing effective safeguarding and the potential risk to provision:

There remains a disjoin around the extent to which DBS checks should be undertaken in Adult Education (19+ adults). Ofsted have required us to DBS all staff, volunteers etc which contradicts guidance from the DBS service and local authorities which suggests that DBS checks without due regard and need are not legal. Lack of proportionate response to H&S of community venues also a concern. H&S overkill could lead to closing and loss of learning opportunities in isolated areas as to meet

some inspectors H&S expectations, delivery would be too risky in many community locations.

Looking forward, several respondents raised questions about how the inspection approach would apply to the apprenticeship reforms. This included the potential to create a disproportionate burden on providers under the employer ownership model.

What was also new in the narrative relating to the inspectorate for 2016 was references to the negative impact on the credibility of the sector that the views of the Her Majesty's Chief Inspector has had. This was not picked up in the quantitative part of the survey but comments included:

Until Sir Michael Wilshaw has gone I will always have concerns over the reliability of Ofsted findings for FE providers due to his publicly stated bias against the sector (which I still believe he has - not interested in his half hearted denial).

Ofsted is now non-credible. Not only because of Wilshaw's recent public statements, but because the CIF changes every 2 years and the emphasis with Ofsted inspections every few months.

the incumbent leader is unable to formulate a professional answer when subjected to scrutiny, at best he comes out with a personal opinion which contains sweeping generalisations.

About 75% of the respondents expressed some level of concern (16% extremely concerned) about support, post inspection, from both the inspectorate and other agencies. This is a slight increase over 2015. Comments related to the impact of a lack of funding for post inspection improvement and also a lack of clarity on what agencies could provide such resource.

73% of respondents expressed some concern (24% extremely concerned) with the role of the FE commissioner. Concerns with area reviews emerged in more detail in other sections of the survey but comments in this section related to the slow pace of implementation and the increased burden of 'further checks on the sector'.

7 GOVERNANCE

Governance would appear from the survey to be the least problematic issue among the wide range of stakeholders in the FE and Skills sector. The six areas investigated are among the lowest in the rankings for levels of concern. Out of 88 categories over the whole survey, Finding Governors/board members/trustees with the right skills came 75th, Training (76th), Quality of Stewardship (83rd), Getting Governors/board members/trustees sufficiently involved (84th), Diversity of Governors/board members/trustees (85th) and Expertise of Clerk and/or Company Secretary (88th).

However, any interpretation of the governance data comes with strong caveats since only 1.61% of the 731 respondents were from people whose main job role was

'Governor/Board member/Trustee'. This is only slightly up on last year (1.49%), despite the inclusion of an additional question focusing on the work of clerks and company secretaries.

That said, as with last year's survey, there are issues that do come to the fore on how relevant the governance model is to today's corporations – particularly in the light of area reviews and the move to devolved management structures. Also, the apparent continuing dominance of white middle-class men of the boards needs to be addressed with ever greater urgency.

Also, echoing last year's results, no area provoked a significantly high level of concern. There were similar areas of concern in all six areas: **finding governors/board members/trustees with the right skills, training, expertise of the clerk and/or company secretary, getting governors sufficiently involved, quality of stewardship and challenge** and **diversity of governors** – with around one-third of respondents expressing 'moderate' to 'extreme' concern in four areas, with questions of diversity and expertise raising such concerns among a quarter of respondents. If anything, there is less concern overall this year, with the expertise of the clerk being the least problematic, eliciting some concern from just 39%.

In response to the questions relating to **finding governors/board members/trustees with the right skills** 19% were extremely concerned, 17% were moderately concerned and 57% expressed some level of concern. In comments from respondents, a picture emerges of an initial difficulty finding quality governors and a subsequent difficulty keeping them, with all the reforms currently being imposed on colleges.

'It's more difficult to find quality people who can commit to the amount of time and level of responsibility required'

'Fortunately there are some very good people in the sector but there is a danger of losing them (some of them) from the knock on from the Area Review process'

'Unfortunately, few suitable people are likely to volunteer for this role because of the increasing bureaucracy within education and the fact that most professionals are already too busy with other activities.'

In response to the questions relating to **training**, 15% were extremely concerned, 25% were moderately concerned and 66% expressed some level of concern. Despite the small number of respondents, this shows a significant leap in levels of concern which last year 10% extremely concerned and 15% moderately so. Despite the apparent sharp rise, there was little to reflect this in respondents' comments.

'Governors should have mandatory training on FELTAG and other national agendas.'

'We are trying to encourage a stronger business influence within school governing bodies.'

'Members of the Board are all volunteers and have got stuck in a rut even though some have received Trustee responsibility training.'

On the question of the **expertise of the clerk and/or company secretary**, there is so little concern that the state of play is either one of extreme confidence or one of complacency. Only one in 12 respondents (8%) expressed extreme concern and one in eight (13%) were moderately concerned. Overall, only 39% expressed some concern. There were no comments from respondents in relation to this question beyond one person who saw the post as a career opportunity

'Slight bias as I may be applying for Clerk to governor's role!'

As with the 2015 survey, the question of **getting governors sufficiently involved** again elicited a low-key response, with 13% saying they were extremely concerned, 16% showing moderate concern and 54% expressing some level of concern. Comments in this regard illustrated the lack of involvement. There is a corollary to this, which is that, in the view of many respondents, too much is expected of governors, who find themselves alienated or out of their depth (a question also of the right training, maybe).

'We have never ever met our link Governor, despite continuous asking of management when they will meet the workforce in our area? We are continuously short staffed, worried about our jobs, yet still no sign of our Governor meeting us. A disgrace.'

'Governors, who are part-time volunteers, are having unrealistic demands placed upon them. It's ridiculous that Chairs - who are a variable group at best - are having to devote hours to area review'

On the issue of **quality of stewardship and challenge**, 15% of respondents said they were extremely concerned, 18% were moderately concerned and 55% expressed some level of concern. Comments in this regard echoed the lack of involvement. As with the 2015 survey, comments suggest the fault lies more with the model of governance than with the individual or board.

'I've seen several Chairs who are hopelessly out of their depth with this level of strategic thinking and planning.'

'Our Chair of Governors should have retired many years ago. He is out of touch with reality of FE now.'

'It is difficult to find trustees and board members who have a good understanding of the sector'

Levels of concern over **diversity of governing boards** echo what was said in the other four questions and have change little over the past 12 months, as 11% of respondents said they were extremely concerned, 16% were moderately concerned and 54% expressed some level of concern. Unlike respondents to the previous surveys, there were no comments reflecting any prevalence of white middle class men, though there was one suggestion a reduction in professional of diversity with a narrowing of board membership.

'The governing body has just announced they will no longer require elections of staff reps on the board!'

8 EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

Last year we reported that the Employer Engagement section of the survey attracted fewer respondents than many other sections. Major concerns were the burdens and costs of engagement and the effectiveness of engagement.

The 2016 Survey confirms that this area of work has moved well up the agenda and brought with it new concerns into the sector. The impact of the Apprenticeship Levy was of moderate (22%) or extreme (40%) concern to respondents, closely followed by the involvement of employers in Apprenticeship reforms.

The central thrust of respondent comments was that Apprenticeship reforms were a systemic shambles which dislocated Apprenticeship training from work experience, careers guidance, future prospects and the needs of the overwhelming majority of businesses and employers.

'The apprenticeship levy will only be affecting 2% UK Employers therefore this will have little or no effect on many areas of business and locations across the country. Employers have been actively engaged with the apprenticeship reform and developing new sector and job specific apprenticeships. However, engagement needs to start at an earlier stage so that when the time comes for young people to make decisions about their own careers, they are doing so fully aware of the career opportunities available to them. Work experience placements should be available to all and not just limited to the elite who have family connections. Work Experience is a valuable tool to inspire and inform young people about the world of work, and for many young people this will be their first engagement with employment, therefore this needs to be taken more seriously by employers, parents, schools and government.'

Again and again, respondents drew attention to the marginalisation of the overwhelming majority of employers who are SMEs. The sheer quantities of SMEs within the economy, the administrative burdens of taking on apprentices, the process of employer education about the value of apprentices and the domination of the Apprenticeship framework by large employers were adduced as concerns which

would simultaneously blight the prospects of young people and alienate many employers.

‘SMEs are not represented in the trailblazers. I ask the question ‘how many companies with staff of under 50 were involved in any part of the trailblazers?’ I have not received the answer. It is clear that huge business operators have used this opportunity to shape what huge business need, not what the majority of ALL business require.’

Another respondent added

‘It would appear that SME's have not really been considered in the restructure, it's more about what the large companies can do. SME's will not necessarily be given all the right information on why it is a benefit to them.’

The Apprenticeship Levy was widely viewed as a serious problem

‘Although I have been working closely with employers to develop their awareness of the new apprenticeship reform and the levy this is only serving to alienate employers from the apprenticeship process.’

Forcing employers to be involved in the training of their apprentices is both an opportunity and a threat. Large employers will find the resources to undertake the additional burden it places on them, many small employers will withdraw from training their employee, as can be seen with the involvement in the development of the trailblazers!’

Providers attracted some criticism, however, for not always understanding how the world looks from an employer’s perspective:

‘Some of the work I do is trying to persuade training providers and colleges to think about their employer engagement strategy. Anyone can sell something for free, when employers have to pay the levy or a third of training, persuading an employer to part with cash and that it is worth it is the biggest challenge providers face (in my view). I have worked with some providers that are excellent teachers, but they have never thought about ROI and seeing things from an employer’s point of view, it is always from the learners’ point of view. This is the crux of who will survive and who will disappear.’

Cynicism, otherwise known as the voice of experience, was never far from the surface. Of the levy itself, one person wrote:

‘Two things will happen: The computer system will not work for at least 18 months and within the first two years there will be a fraud case running into millions of pounds. Unfortunately, Paddy Power will not give me the odds....’

You heard it here first.

9 LOCAL ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIPS

Questions 21 and 22 sought respondents' views on Local Enterprise Partnerships. 519 people responded – a slight increase on last year's 506, with 33 taking the opportunity to add additional comments, in comparison with 31 last year.

Levels of concern on these issues had, however, increased dramatically since last year. The status of FE and skills providers in the devolved landscape once again provoked the most concern this year – but whereas last year 31% of respondents described themselves as 'extremely concerned' and a total of just over 50% were 'extremely' or 'moderately' concerned, this year 46.1% were 'extremely' and 27.8% 'moderately' concerned – a total of 73.9%, or nearly three-quarters of respondents.

Status concerns were more nuanced this year. Whereas previously concerns tended to relate to FE's low status in relation to HE or schools, this year some comments reflected perceived discrepancies between parts of the FE sector itself:

'a lot of the LEPs are a closed shop between colleges, universities, big business and the LEP staff themselves'; 'LEPs have shown a tendency to engage with the College sector to the exclusion of the ITP's'; 'many often favour larger providers'; 'our local LEP is not engaging with Adult and Community Learning Services ...and does not understand the role of Community Learning in engaging those furthest from learning.'

Included here were concerns about conflicts of interest for Local Authorities, given their several roles:

'Devo deals are seen by local authorities as a way to access skills funding'; 'we face the possible situation of local authorities deciding on funding allocations when they have their own training provider arms.'

An interesting light was cast by one respondent on the position of new delivery models that have been so strongly encouraged by Government in recent years:

'As a sub-contractor to a Local Authority who supported our organisation to spin out, we are in an increasingly precarious position with less influence than ever before...'

Unsurprisingly, given the levels of concern about the status of FE and skills providers, nearly as many respondents also reported serious concerns about devolution, with 36.3% 'extremely' and 27% 'moderately' concerned – a total of 63.6%, or nearly two-thirds of respondents. Some referred to the 'nascent' nature of the LEP in their area or the low levels of staffing in LEPs more generally:

'How can you devolve funding to a body that consists of two people in some cases?'

In relation to devolution, several respondents commented adversely on LEPs' limited understanding of FE and skills more generally:

'there are only a handful of staff with limited knowledge of the sector'; '(We will now depend on) decisions made by others who don't fully appreciate the sector and understand it as well as we do'; 'particularly worrying when they are set to gain more influence and, in certain cases, don't have the ability or skill to know how to use it.'

One respondent commented acerbically:

'I'm really concerned about the devolution of skills budgets to LEPs/LAs - particularly given the wonderful job they've made of getting the ESF tenders out so successfully and on time...!'

Many respondents highlighted the huge variability between LEPs in terms of their staffing, history, knowledge & understanding as a concern: one respondent summed it up simply as:

'Some LEPs work well; others are worse than useless. All are understaffed for the role they are expected to perform.'

Some respondents spoke highly of their local LEPs, but in some cases, even where a local LEP was perceived as performing well, respondents were aware that the wider picture was not so rosy:

'Our LEP is very proactive on skills. However, the devolution agenda in (our region) is frankly a complete mess.'

One asked an obvious question that underlies other respondents' concerns:

'(My) concern is the range of quality and lack of minimum standards between LEP's - for example (LEP1) have lots of information and are generally regarded as very good; (LEP 2) however has been regarded locally as a basket case for years. How can there be such disparity between organisations? Who is holding them to account?'

Under the headings of 'Uncertainties of roles/power and 'Communicating, co-working and influencing', respondents also indicated noticeably higher levels of concern than before, with roughly a third 'extremely' and a third 'moderately' concerned in each case (Uncertainties: 33% 'extremely concerned'; 63% total 'extremely' and 'moderately concerned' ; Communicating: 33.6% 'extremely concerned'; 66.4% 'extremely' and 'moderately' concerned'). Lack of clarity, unresolved issues between players, and difficulties in communicating and 'breaking into' established relationships were all highlighted as hampering progress. One respondent commented:

'Communication is very poor and the understanding of education and training ... weak, making the commissioning process haphazard and overly bureaucratic. ... The national picture emerging should be ringing alarm bells. The LEP in this region has similar levels of low expertise and poor communication. Do this group of unelected, middle aged white male businessmen really understand the need to fund training for care workers?'

Some more general concerns were expressed in written comments about how the LEP model is developing – 'LEPs are in danger of being marginalised in the process and then subsumed in to the LA - no longer an employer-driven model'; 'LEPs do not create jobs, businesses do. Where are the businesses?'

One respondent commented gloomily: *'It feels like we are going back to the TEC days without the knowledge of those staff.'*

However, one struck a defiantly positive note about the potential of LEPs to encourage partnership work between providers, commenting:

'LEPs should have the opportunity to control the FE and training providers budgets in the local areas... where there is duplication the individuals should be encouraged to join forces and work collaboratively for the good of the local economy and local workforce, including the unemployed, and not the MD /Principal to line their pockets.'

These responses indicate that unprecedentedly high levels of concern exist in the sector about LEPs and devolution, and in particular about variability between areas and the limited understanding some LEPs have shown of the FE agenda. This is a concern that can only get worse, given the Government's continuing determination to devolve skills budgets to bodies that in some areas are patently not yet ready to manage them, with resulting worrying implications for institutions, staff and learners.

10 PROVIDER AND CROSS SECTORAL PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships with other education and training sectors, providers and bodies

In 2016, the 518 responses to these questions indicate a higher level of concern about partnerships with other education and training sectors, other providers and other bodies, than in the previous two years. While approaching half (43%) of respondents expressed slight or no concern in both 2014 and 2015, nearly 80% were more concerned than this in 2016. 30% of respondents were somewhat concerned in 2016, whereas in 2014 and 2013 the comparative figures were only 18-19%; and the proportion of those moderately or extremely concerned in 2016 was as high as 45%, with substantially lower proportions expressing these high levels of concern in both 2015 (23%) and 2014 (26%).

Partnerships with government and non-government organisations

In 2016, 18% of respondents had no concerns about partnerships with other government and non-government organisations, whereas in 2015 and 2014 almost 40% had no or slight concerns. Over a third (34%) of respondents were somewhat concerned about these partnerships in 2016, more than the 19-20% in 2014 and 2015; and the proportions of those moderately or extremely concerned was also higher in 2016, being 42% of respondents, compared with 30% in 2014 and 25% in 2015.

Partnerships with contractors or sub-contractors

The pattern of higher levels of concern in 2016 applies also to the levels of concern about partnerships with contractors and sub-contractors. In 2016 only 20% of respondents had no concerns, while in 2014 and 2015, 40-41% of respondents had no or only slight concern about these partnerships. The proportion of those

somewhat concerned was 17% in both 2014 and 2015; in 2016 it is 25%. And the proportion of those moderately or extremely concerned about these partnerships has risen from about a quarter in 2014 (26%) to closer to a half (44%) of the 518 respondents in 2016.

The following points are worth noting with respect to concerns about partnerships:

- There are higher levels of concern about partnerships in all three areas (other sectors, providers and bodies; government and non-government organisations; contractors or sub-contractors) in 2016 than in 2015 and 2014. In these two preceding years, levels of concern were similar, making the rise in concerns across all types of partnerships in 2016 all the more noticeable
- Despite levels of concern being high, in terms of relative concerns about the nearly 90 topics in the survey, concerns about all areas of partnerships are in the lowest quarter of the ranked list
- Some comments from respondents provide evidence of some positive views and experience with respect to partnerships; however other comments indicate specific issues of concern, for example in relation to: uncertainty about the future; complexity and bureaucracy producing inefficiency and absorbing funding; ongoing concerns about SFA processes and approaches to funding; and, in particular, the vulnerability of subcontractors in the current context.

Positive views of partnerships

Although very much in the minority, there were some positive comments about the potential and experience of partnerships, such as:

'I have had a very good experience with subcontracting'.

'Just think partnership working is the way forward. Make a few close allies, offer different things and signpost each other'.

'We work in a true partnership'.

Uncertainty about the future

Concern about future uncertainties, especially in relation to sub-contracting, is well illustrated by the following comments:

'What's going to happen to subcontracting with reforms and devolution?'

'Unsure has to how subcontracting will play a part in the future'.

SFA processes and approaches to funding

The ongoing SFA-related concerns are indicated by the following comments:

'SFA has tied itself up in knots with ludicrous processes around subcontracting which make everything complex and expensive while providing zero protection for the public purse.'

'I am worried our partnership with SFA will cease to function if they do cut YET another huge swathe of staff. The problem is all the good ones are leaving and (with a few notable, noble exceptions) we're down to the timeservers now...'

Complexity and bureaucracy

Perceived difficulties created by the complexity of multiple layers of partnerships, multi-agency working, and related bureaucracy come through strongly in the following comments from respondents:

'They're all in competition to deliver the same things. Too many layers of cost take out too much money leaving next to nothing for the learners'.

'It can be a full-time job maintaining and developing productive partnerships without drowning in bureaucracy and meetings which are not productive'.

'The issue is how far partnership working supports coherent provision and consistent standards or whether it inhibits by fragmenting relationships (partnerships need to be renewed or change) and encouraging multiple layers of complexity (outsourcing; sub-contracting)'.

Vulnerabilities of sub-contractors

A particularly strong theme in 2016 is concern about the high risks to the viability of sub-contractors and the quality of sub-contracted provision because of pressures and other restrictions. Relevant comments include the following:

'Lack of time to service and develop partnerships. Prime contractors with limited understanding of FE and Adult Education but who are happy to make decisions without proper reference and / or have little involvement in leadership and management of any contract despite taking a substantial management fee (and not therefore making good use of public funding)'.

'Subcontractors squeezed on fees cut corners and quality to stay afloat - some disgraceful practices where successful providers are being fleeced but unable to gain direct contract themselves. Roll on the levy...'

'Collaboration/partnership with other colleges has all but ended since the advent of AR. Changes to funding rules and the local agenda for skills will lead to significantly reduced sub-contracting; putting small(niche) training providers out of business.'

‘Direct funding may result in larger organisations wanting to do a lot of the delivery themselves as a result of paying the levy, particularly government organisations’
‘Sub contractors under increasing financial pressure quality is suffering’.

11 WIDER POLICY CONTEXT

Broad direction of travel for FE and Skills

Concern about the broad direction of travel for FE and Skills has been high in all 3 survey years. However, the already high levels of concern in both 2014 and 2015 have been topped in 2016. In each year only 3-4% of respondents have been not at all concerned. In 2014 and 2015, 19% of respondents have been not more than somewhat concerned, with 16-19% being moderately concerned and 54-55% being extremely concerned. In 2016, reported levels of concern are higher, with 23% of the over 500 respondents being moderately concerned, and 59% being extremely concerned. These high levels of concern are reflected in the fact that concern about the broad government direction of travel for the sector has the third highest ranking out of the nearly 90 survey topics of concern.

Sector complexity

Levels of concern about sector complexity have been relatively high in all three survey years, with only 4-5% of respondents being not at all concerned, and 8% being only slightly concerned in 2014 and 2015. 15% of respondents were somewhat concerned in 2016 and 2015, and 11% in 2014. However, the proportion of those moderately or extremely concerned about sector complexity was over two-thirds (68%) in 2014. This level of concern reduced in 2015 to 62%; but in 2016 over three-quarters (78%) of respondents reported having moderate or extreme levels of concern, and for the majority of these, concern is extreme. These high levels of concern are reflected in the fact that concern about sector complexity has the tenth highest ranking out of the nearly 90 topics of concern.

Media coverage and sector reputation

Levels of concern about media coverage and sector reputation were similar in 2014 and 2015, with no or slight concern being expressed in 22% of respondents in both years, 17% and 19% being somewhat concerned in 2014 and 2015 respectively. Moderate or extreme concern was reported by something over half of respondents in both 2014 (56%) and 2015 (53%). Levels of concern in 2016 are higher; while only 6% of respondents have no concern, 22% are somewhat concerned; and over two-thirds (70%) are moderately or extremely concerned. Concern about media coverage and sector reputation is ranked 17th in the list of levels of concern for nearly 90 survey topics.

Reviewing the areas of concern about policy, a number of points arise:

- Levels of concern with respect to policy are very high overall. This has been the case to some extent in each survey year, but there is a clear increase in concern in all areas in 2016, compared with 2014 and 2015
- With respect to these policy and sector context topics, positive comments are noticeably absent
- Comments from respondents identify a number of specific issues of concern, particularly in relation to: the direction of travel of FE and Skills, and the role of the government in this context; a related sense that the current administration is 'out of touch' with FE and Skills; consequent confusion and complexity, contributed to by uncertainties with respect to the responsibilities and boundaries for government departments and bodies; the role and contribution of the Education and Training Foundation and other sector bodies; and concerns about media coverage and the reputation of the sector.

Direction of travel of FE and Skills

There are many comments and very high levels of concern about the perceived negative direction of travel of FE and Skills. Many of the comments make specific reference to government policy initiatives as contributing to the difficulties, as indicated by the following statements:

'It is fairly clear that the direction of travel is woeful. The speed of reforms (English and Maths; GCSE and A level reform), the ad hoc nature of policy (the levy; Area Reviews), the rhetoric (3 million apprenticeships is a solution!).'

'The direction of FE colleges seems pretty gloomy with funding cuts and more pressure on resources to provide skills to learners and the wider community, with area reviews on the horizon which I think are more about money than about the learner.'

'The government fails to recognise the economic and social importance of FE. They fail to understand that many students are not ready to go into apprenticeships when they leave school. By devaluing and undermining FE, they undermine social mobility. Future generations will look back at this period as the Bonfire of the FE Sector, and wonder why on earth we let it happen.'

'Vocational studies in FE are more or less dead. The creative industries in FE are more or less dead and it is due to government priorities within the sector even though the creative industries are the fastest growing industry in this country.'

'Although recently the government seems to have woken up to the benefits of some aspects of FE, there is still little true understanding in government.'

'In trying to reform FE, I fear they will not sufficiently learn enough about the sector to ensure that any potential reforms are necessary, never mind properly planned.'

A government which is 'out of touch'

Related to concerns about government policy are comments which illustrate the perception of many respondents that there is little understanding at government level of the role and activities of the FE and Skills sector. Relevant comments include:

'FE is so far from the life experience of ministers and mandarins, with their public school and Oxbridge education, as to resemble an obscure foreign country with its own alphabet.'

'Further education is not understood by the government. This is my largest concern.'

'I'm not convinced government has a direction of travel when it comes to post-16 learning!'

Confusion and complexity

Comments from respondents indicate that uncertainty and confusion have contributed to a complex infrastructure with lack of clarity about roles, processes and boundaries. There appears to be a high strength of feeling about this issue, as illustrated by the following comments:

'BIS/DfE seem to have a goal in mind but no idea how to get there. They are unorganised and will expect everyone to meet the end goal but at the very last minute because of their lack of organisation. This causes huge problems for everyone involved in delivery because it is impossible to do business planning and budgeting when you do not actually know what the detail of processes and procedures in the future are going to be.'

'Confusion with regards to BIS/DfE is always intense, and does not help when trying to get appropriate and timely information to facilitate change.'

'The BIS/DfE boundary is being eroded by increasing joint EFA/SFA working, but the different cultures in the two departments remain unhelpful.'

'There should be a comprehensive government department that deals with training & education under 1 roof, with various branches to support the key differences all working towards a common goal /vision.'

'BIS rules on SASE and DFE rules on the Early Years Educator are directly contradictory'

'There is nothing clear or certain about any aspect of what the sector will be doing in, supposedly, 2 years' time. We cannot adequately prepare for something when we do not know what that something is.'

'In seeking to streamline the education system by devolving it to the four corners of the earth, this government has fallen foul of its own legal obligation of accountability. It has therefore created another bureaucracy, in all but name, to compensate. This new set of layers is not fit for purpose. The diagram of the various directions of schools, HE, FE and apprenticeships looks like a Rorschach test.'

The role of sector bodies including the Education and Training Foundation

In 2014 concern about the role of the Education and Training Foundation and other sector support bodies was strong, with fewer than a fifth of respondents being not at all or only slightly concerned, 14% being somewhat concerned, and over half (55%) being moderately or extremely concerned. In 2015 lower levels of concern were expressed; nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents were not at all or only slightly concerned, 18% were somewhat concerned, and fewer than half (42%) were moderately or extremely concerned. However, in 2016 concern was again higher; only 6% of respondents had no concern about support from sector bodies, 28% were somewhat concerned, and, as in 2014, over half (57%) were moderately or extremely concerned. Relative to concerns about other topics, concern about this issue came about halfway down the ranked list of nearly 90 topics.

While lower levels of concern are expressed about the role of sector bodies than other issues, there is some evidence that support from the Education and Training Foundation could better achieve its potential. The following comments are relevant here:

'It is good to see a new professional body but it is not a democratic body so let's hope it does not implode like the IFL.'

'I am not sure what purpose the ETF really serves, and if it really deserves its status and finance.'

'Has there been an assessment of the VFM of the ETF et al for the sector?'

Sector reputation and media coverage

The high level of concern about negative media coverage and its impact on sector reputation is well illustrated by the following comments:

'The financial state of colleges means the sector is exposed to further ridicule and taking on a victim role.'

'We are already seeing negative media coverage regarding apprenticeship reforms and employers' pre-emptive actions in advance of levy'

'It feels like the sector is under attack.'

12 OTHER CONCERNS

Although funding was covered elsewhere in the survey, the highest number of respondents used this section to elaborate on related issues here. These included detailed issues related to apprenticeships, for example:

'The apprenticeship delivery model does not work given the breadth of component aims to be delivered (can providers afford a vocational specialist, a technical training

specialist to underpin the vocational training, maths, English and possibly ICT specialists, not forgetting PTLS, ERR) together with the lack of guidance as to how it can work (what qualification should people delivering apprenticeships hold for example) and meet employer's needs at the same time'

'The uncertainty with SFA allocations and the release of reduced AGE grant funding for apprenticeships. This will have a direct impact on the organisation I am working with at the moment as other providers still have access to the funding so if we are not able to support our employers to access the AGE grant they will go to another provider which means we will have used less of our SFA profile budget.'

'The slow completion pace of Trailblazer standards. Low funding rates for English and maths in apprenticeships Employers paying low salaries for apprentices. The constant reliance on success rates which can impede quality and reduce the amount of individualised learning'

'Clarity on SME apprenticeship funding is crucial.'

'With the latest policies and funding appear to be heavily place on Apprenticeship, the budget will continue to shrink for adult community learning and skill development aiming for lower lever learners and learners in the locally identified priority groups - the group of learners are not shrinking however, i.e. that will reduce greatly the opportunities of learning and life enhancement for these learners'.

Uncertainty linked to funding, policy stability and the ability to plan was also referred number of times in this section. Typical comments included:

'The squeeze on funding means that there isn't enough time to properly formulate plans for change - they are rushed and ill-thought-through'.

'Forecasting the future learning programme and opportunities given the changing goal posts from Government, reduction in funding available for Adult Education and uncertainty of life after EU vote.'

'Funds keep being cut which has an impact on staff numbers - why are budgets not set earlier rather than Colleges having to back track in the final term of the year and reassess all their planning. This is no way to run a business.'

'Unable to plan and prepare for change due to uncertainty.'

'Effects of referendum on UK status in EU- job relates to European funding hence this is a big concern'

'Ideological nature of educational policy across all sectors; policy based on the personal preference and whim of ministers, rather than research/evidence from educational professionals; the back door privatisation of the education system through academies, free schools etc., regardless of substantive evidence that they can/do produce better education than the state system ...'

'The squeeze on funding means that there isn't enough time to properly formulate plans for change - they are rushed and ill-thought-through'

Revisiting staffing issues was the third highest area with responses in this section. Comments included:

'The college I work for has frozen increments that staff are entitled to and awarded a pay rise of zero percent. As a result, I am getting poorer every year whilst my workload increases. Recruitment of well qualified industry experienced staff is now much harder whilst experienced staff are leaving or retiring. I might be leaving as well.'

'The lack of good, qualified teaching staff and staff teaching subjects that they are neither confident in with regard to their own skills nor have the underpinning knowledge to teach'

'Loss of administrative and support staff, leaving specialist teaching staff covering admin and support roles, with no training or time to carry out this work'.

'Increasing financial instability will again mean no pay rises for staff - both teaching and support. Along with increased national insurance contributions this means a continued drop in the standard of living and further difficulty in recruiting and retaining good quality staff. No foreseeable end in sight as weak Colleges will be forced to merge, putting financial pressure on those stronger colleges they are merging with'.

'Staff morale when external communications from Government, OFSTED etc. portray a sector which does not provide quality and have an impact on lives. This is totally untrue. No one comes into FE to earn a fortune and if you think you are making a difference and you are valued by society then the extra hours and limited pay do not get you down as much as feeling undervalued'

'academic staff delivering vocational subjects'.

'non replacement of staff . there are fewer people working in the college and the workloads are becoming untenable'

'While the issues around terms and conditions can be quantified through the survey the experience of members is seriously short changed in terms of being properly expressed. The Area Reviews for example have yet to develop a 'Staff Voice' policy and there is no systematic workforce development implemented in colleges that could be said to enhance the profession'

13 CONCLUSION

The reach of the 2016 survey continues to be impressive with again well over 700 respondents engaging, mainly through promotion by FE Week. Nearly half of the respondents were 'front line' staff with 40% from leadership and management constituencies. 24% of all respondents were 'middle managers'.

As in previous years the quantitative and qualitative responses been dominated by two or three interconnected issues with 'funding' still being the area of greatest concern. Institutional funding generated a remarkably high average level of concern

score of 2.56 with learner funding close behind (if 100% of respondents were extremely concerned then the score would be 3.00). The detail behind these scores can be found in section 1 (Funding) and throughout the survey report.

The serious concerns with funding were underpinned by significant disquiet over government policy. This was expressed in a variety of ways with short termism, lack of direction, and ambiguity all leading to the creation of major barriers to institutional planning and considerable uncertainty. In some cases, these were compounded by area reviews in the college sector. In 2016 the apprenticeship reforms are clearly at the forefront of the respondents' thinking with an average level of concern score of 2.28 with the levy scoring 2.27. Sections 8 (Employer Engagement) and 11 (Wider Policy Context) explore these high levels of concern in considerable depth.

Thirdly, the narrative related to low morale and poor sector reputation is an even more strident one in 2016. The extensive staffing section (3) of the report gives a full but pessimistic picture of the nuances behind this. Other details can be found in sections 11 (Wider Policy Context) and 12 (Other Concerns). What emerges even more strongly this year is how the sector is seen to lack champions at the highest level. This applies to government departments and the inspectorate where comments from the outgoing chief inspector were signposted as being particularly damaging.

In the context of the wide range of concerns analysed in this report Ofsted is lower in the rankings than previously. Nevertheless, section 6 (Inspection and Quality), shows that respondents revealed a higher level of concern here than in the previous two years. In 2016, although issues relating to the reliability of the inspection methodology generated considerable concern, respondents are even more worried about other issues.

In amongst all this turmoil the survey respondents were somewhat silent on the stewardship of both individual institutions and of the sector as a whole. Governance issues feature in section 7 but there were few references to the role that sector membership bodies are, or could be, playing.

The EU referendum result was announced as this report was being finalised. Some respondents gave an insight into the uncertainty that might result from Brexit and the future of the European Regional Development Fund in particular. This linked particularly closely to the new question in 2016 relating to causes for optimism. More details can be found in the executive summary but learners and students topped the list here, revealing a strong passion in the sector for what is really important to those that work in it.

Thank you for reading this report. The Policy Consortium particularly wish to thank the survey respondents for the time they took to complete the survey.

ANNEX 1: ALL RESPONSES RANKED BY LEVEL OF CONCERN

The survey tool calculates an 'average level of concern' using a score as follows none: 0; somewhat: 1; moderate: 2; extreme: 3. If every respondent indicated that they were extremely concerned about a topic then this would generate the maximum score of 3. N/A responses have not been counted.

Theme	Topic	average level of concern
Funding	Levels/rates of institutional funding	2.56
Funding	Adequacy of learner funding	2.47
Policy	Broad government 'direction of travel' for FE and skills	2.38
Funding	Funding for growth	2.36
Funding	External bureaucracy	2.36
Policy	Reform of Apprenticeships	2.28
Staffing	Staff workload	2.28
Employer Engagement	Potential impact of the apprenticeship levy	2.27
LEPs	Status of FE and skills providers	2.23
Policy	Sector complexity (e.g. BIS/DfE boundary)	2.22
Curriculum	Maths and English assessment and capacity to deliver	2.19
Staffing	Staff motivation	2.17
Funding	Introduction of employer levy for apprenticeships	2.13
Employer Engagement	Employer involvement in apprenticeship reforms	2.09
Inspection & Quality	Reliability of Ofsted inspection findings	2.07
Curriculum	Pace and volume of curriculum change	2.04
Policy	Media coverage and sector reputation	2.03
LEPs	Communicating/co-working/influencing	2.02
LEPs	Devolution	2.01
Inspection & Quality	Administrative burden of quality and inspection systems	2.00
Staffing	Staff retention/turnover	1.98
Staffing	Specialist teachers e.g. of English, maths, vocational subjects	1.98
LEPs	Uncertainties of roles/power	1.97
Teaching, Learning & Assessment	Uncertainties and/or clarity of Ofsted criteria and emphases	1.97
Staffing	Availability of opportunities and budgets for staff training	1.97
Competition & Collaboration	Area review outcomes	1.95
Staffing	Staff pay and conditions	1.93
Staffing	Competition (for finding and retaining staff) from other sectors/industry	1.93
Funding	Capital funding	1.91

Inspection & Quality	Changes to inspection approaches and the Common Inspection Framework	1.91
Competition & Collaboration	Area review process	1.88
Funding	Funding for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	1.87
Curriculum	Making sense of the system of qualifications and pathways for new learners	1.86
Funding	Discretionary support	1.84
Employer Engagement	employer involvement in assessment	1.81
Curriculum	Complexity of the offer	1.79
Teaching, Learning & Assessment	Student capability and preparedness for learning	1.79
Curriculum	Work experience	1.76
Staffing	Quality of leaders	1.76
Curriculum	Funding for enrichment	1.75
Employer Engagement	Effectiveness of engagement with employers	1.74
Policy	Role of the Education and Training Foundation and other bodies supporting the sector	1.74
Staffing	Succession for leadership and management	1.74
Staffing	Communications with staff	1.73
Funding	Internal bureaucracy	1.72
Inspection & Quality	Resources and support from Ofsted	1.72
Curriculum	Resources for curriculum delivery (materials, equipment, etc)	1.70
Competition & Collaboration	Local provider range and quantity of provision	1.69
Competition & Collaboration	Competition with other providers	1.67
Curriculum	Range and breadth of qualifications and progression routes	1.67
Employer Engagement	Burdens/costs of employer engagement	1.67
Funding	Learning loans	1.65
Staffing	Quality of managers	1.65
Teaching, Learning & Assessment	Learner motivation and engagement	1.64
Curriculum	Workplace training	1.62
Inspection & Quality	Responding to inspection reports	1.60
Funding	Travel to learn subsidies	1.59
Inspection & Quality	Role of the FE commissioner	1.59

Curriculum	Assessment methods	1.58
Employer Engagement	Range and quality of employer contacts	1.53
Inspection & Quality	Reliability of and confidence in internal systems	1.53
Employer Engagement	Retention/maintenance and churn of employer contacts	1.51
Teaching, Learning & Assessment	Information, advice and guidance	1.51
Teaching, Learning & Assessment	Role and availability of ILT and other digital technologies	1.50
Staffing	Staff performance management	1.49
Curriculum	Higher Education provision	1.45
Curriculum	Learner self-guided/independent learning	1.45
Partnerships	Partnerships with contractors or sub-contractors	1.44
Partnerships	Partnerships with other government and non-government organisations	1.42
Partnerships	Partnerships with other education/training sectors, providers and bodies	1.41
Inspection & Quality	Resources and support from agencies/membership bodies	1.41
Inspection & Quality	Data-handling and use	1.40
Curriculum	Personalised learning	1.39
Governance	Finding governors/board members/trustees with the right skills	1.38
Governance	Training	1.37
Teaching, Learning & Assessment	Student behaviour	1.36
Staffing	Skills and qualifications of teaching/training staff	1.35
Staffing	Staff flexibility	1.34
Staffing	Age profile of workforce	1.30
Teaching, Learning & Assessment	Learning support, feedback to learners and pastoral care	1.29
Teaching, Learning & Assessment	Capacity to respond to the 'learner voice'	1.29
Governance	Quality of stewardship and challenge	1.25
Governance	Getting governors/board members/trustees sufficiently involved	1.24
Governance	Diversity of governors/board members/trustees	1.24
Staffing	Skills and qualifications of support staff	1.14
Staffing	Diversity of workforce	1.01
Governance	Expertise of Clerk and/or Company Secretary	0.87

ANNEX 2: RESPONDENTS' CHARACTERISTICS

Main job role or level

682 (93.3%) of the full 731 respondents chose to identify their main job role in the FE and Skills sector, under the 12 categories given. Some 49 therefore left this question 'unanswered' – but it should be noted that 55 self-descriptive roles were also offered as 'comments'. So, several people seemed to have chosen one of the categories and also provided a further refinement. In 2015, 92.3% chose one of these 12 categories; in 2014 – when only 9 possible roles were offered for choice – 91.5% made such a choice. Thus, the willingness to identify roles is high, and has risen slightly each year.

Broadly speaking, 2016's respondents could be grouped as being roughly 40% senior management (principals/CEOs, vice-principals or similar, and senior managers), roughly 49% 'front-line staff' (middle managers, teachers/tutors or similar, support staff and administrators), and about 11% other respondents (i.e., governors, consultants, inspectors and those in miscellaneous roles).

The largest number and percentage of those choosing one of the roles this year was that for 'middle manager', at 166, or 24.3% of the 682. The next largest role selected, and close behind, was 'senior manager', with 151 (or 22.1%). Then, even more closely aligned, came 'tutor/lecturer', at 84/12.3%, and 'support/admin', at 83/12.2%. Next, 71/10.4% chose 'principal/CEO', and there were 62 'consultants' (9.1%). Vice-principals and similar accounted for 50/7.3%. Finally, there were 11 governors/board members (1.6%), and 4 inspectors (0.6%). No respondents self-identified this year as either a journalist, researcher or lobbyist, as was the case in 2015 – raising questions about whether to revise the number and range of role-options offered to those taking part.

Looking across the role categories for this year, a few factors are worth noting about the response patterns. Although 272 (or just under 39.9%) selected descriptions that can be broadly termed 'senior management', it is also true to say that 333 (or 48.8%) chose categories that can reasonably be described as quite or entirely 'hands-on' and 'front-line' (in dealing with learners and their learning) – i.e., 'middle managers', 'tutor/lecturers' and 'support/admin workers'. Even when using only those two last descriptions, the figures are 167, or 24.5%.

Thus, there is a case to consider that the views in this report as being solidly representative of such important – but very different – kinds of people and roles within the sector – reflecting several kinds of perspectives quite well.

Considering this year's overall patterns regarding sector roles against those from the first two surveys in 2014 and 2015, there appears to be broad comparability. There are some trends worth considering, however.

Firstly, there has been a steady percentage of those identifying as ‘principal/CEO’, around 9-10% (even though total numbers have dropped). Those selecting ‘vice-principal’ (or similar) and ‘senior manager’ (or similar) have also seen a broad consistency in their percentages of the total – around 6-7%.

Next, although that combined ‘hands-on, front-line’ group of respondents could rightly be seen – at nearly half of all those choosing any role-category – as being an important influence, it is also true to say that there are mixed trends within those three role-groups since 2014 and 2015. Those identifying as ‘middle managers’ and ‘support/admin’ were a slightly lower proportion of this year’s total (after a slight rise in 2015 over 2014’s percentage). The ‘tutor-lecturer’ category has however risen in percentage this year, from 2015 – as it did last year, over 2014. Thus, a larger and larger slice of respondents each year has been made up of teachers, trainers, tutor or instructors.

The proportion of those choosing ‘consultant’ has grown somewhat since 2015, after its own smaller increase on 2014’s proportion. Those figures have always been limited, however, within a range of around 6% to 9%. The (low) numbers and proportions of those self-identifying in either a governance or an inspectorial role remain pretty consistent across the three surveys, each category always constituting something between 0.5% and 1.5%.

Finally, as an additional point, there were 55 individual optional comments provided at the end of this question (in 2015, this total was 58, and in 2014, it was 99). These included roles such as ‘trade union’, ‘local authority’, ‘job coach’, ‘regulator’, ‘account manager’, ‘Clerk to the Corporation’, ‘auditor’, ‘apprenticeships manager’ (for a national organisation), TUC Regional Education Officer, ‘National FE Advisor’ (for a faith organisation), ‘marketing executive’, ‘teacher trainer’, and ‘starting PGCE course September 2016’.

Employment Status

The question about current employment status produced 722 responses, comprising 98.8% of all 731 respondents. That proportion is very close indeed to those from 2014 and 2015.

Broadly, this year’s respondents were employed full-time, and in permanent positions. The two next highest elements identified themselves as being self-employed and as permanent part-time (‘fractional’).

Of these, 581 (or, 80.5%) were full-time permanent employees of their respective organisations, while a further 15 (2.1%) were full-time, but temporary. This appears to be somewhat untypical of staffing patterns across the FE and Skills sector, but probably reflects the degree of connection that staff in these situations have with matters such as this survey.

Respondents who self-identified as part-time permanent staff numbered 49 – a figure constituting 6.8%. Just 9 participants, or 1.2%, were both part-time and temporary.

Most of these percentages have held steady over the three years of the survey – the one exception of any note being a consistent but small drop in the numbers and proportion of those respondents self-describing as part-time permanent/fractional staff. 'Self-employed' was the status chosen by 52 respondents (7.2%), 'not currently employed' by 4 (or, 0.6%), and 'retired' by 12 respondents, or 1.7%.

In terms of year-on-years trends since 2014, almost all of these percentages are very close over the three surveys. Where the percentages are slightly different, they are within the 'status' categories with small numbers.

As in both 2014 and 2015, one respondent used the 'Comment' section of this question specifically to say that they were on a 'zero-hours' contract – for sessional/part-time working. It is not clear if this is the same individual each year.

Length of experience

Almost identically to 2014 and 2015, length of experience in the FE and skills sector was identified by 99.0% of all 731 taking the survey: i.e., 724 answered this question. In broad terms, this consistency of reporting.

The most frequent degree of experience in the FE and Skills sector selected by respondents was once again the '13+ years' category: 400, or 55.2%. The next-largest group (6-12 years) was chosen by 205 participants (28.3%). This was followed by 71 (9.8%) indicating 3-5 years in the sector respondents. Experience spanning just 0-2 years was selected by 42 people (5.8%). Finally, 6 respondents (0.8%) said the question was not applicable to them.

The proportional patterns here are very consistent over time: all these percentages parallel the results from the 2014 and 2015 surveys very closely, barring a 3% increase in the proportion of 'full-time permanent' respondents, and roughly a 2% drop in the '0-2 years' category.

Nature of organisation with which primarily associated or in which employed, if any

Of the 731 respondents in 2016, some 696 (95.2%) answered this question – yet again, a virtually identical proportion to those that emerged in the first two years. Overall, just short of 65% of respondents were in colleges of one kind or another, while just under 20% were in independent training provider organisations. Roughly a further 10% were in other kinds of provider institutions, and the remaining 7 or 8% or so were in other kinds of organisation, or none at all. These divisions are quite similar to those from 2014 and 2015: however, the proportion of independent training providers has increased by about 3.5%, this year.

Thus, colleges of all kinds were the dominant kind of organisations in which participants worked, this year – 443, or 63.6% (as compared with 63.9% in 2015 and

63.8% in 2014). There were few shifts of any significance over the three years of the survey amongst the various different sub-types of colleges, as well. A small year-on-year growth from GFE colleges has reflected slight drops amongst respondents from sixth-form and independent colleges.

Within the broad definition of 'colleges', then, GFEs were still the largest option chosen: 404, or 58.0% of all choices in this question. The numbers identifying themselves with sixth-form colleges (at 20, or 2.9%) and specialist colleges (19, or 2.7%), as well as being small numbers responding, seem both to be a declining proportion over the three years.

Private/independent training providers was a category identified by some 131 respondents, or 18.8%. Furthermore, 28 participants (4.0%) chose 'adult and community education', and 9 people (1.3%) selected 'third-sector'. However, it is unclear how far those two categories were actually defined as 'providers'. Similarly, although 26 (3.7%) were from local authorities, and 5 people (0.7%) identified themselves with higher education institutions, whether or not they were involved in actual learning or training provision is not certain..

Sector membership and/or support bodies produced 31 respondents (4.5%) – while 5 (0.7%) were from government or related government-linked bodies.

Finally, some 18 participants, or 2.6%, identified themselves as being wholly independent of any organisation.

In terms of three-year trends, then, most figures appear broadly consistent in proportions – although there seems to be steady, if small, declines in the proportions of those identifying themselves as being in the more minority categories of organisations – such as sixth-form colleges, specialist colleges, adult and community education, and government. The only sub-sectoral division that has increased (albeit only slightly) in proportional representation amongst respondents over the 2014-26 period have been those identifying as being private/independent training providers.

ANNEX 3: RESPONDENTS' ACCESS TO THE SURVEY

Awareness of the survey itself and the method of accessing it was covered at the very end, in Question 33.

This year, precisely 500 (or 68.4%) of the 731 total respondents answered that question. Of those 500, 133 (or 26.6%) were full 'FE Week' subscribers, and a further 272 (54.4%) said that they saw the survey on the 'FE Week' website, as regular or casual visitors.

The other 95 people (19.0%) responding to this query indicated that they had had the survey hot-link sent to them independently of 'FE Week' – by an organisation

(such as the Policy Consortium itself, or other professional networks and bodies) or from a colleague – through separate e-mails, social media posts, and similar routes.