ATTRACTING, SUSTAINING AND DEVELOPING MIDDLE LEADERS IN ENGLISH FURTHER EDUCATION

MARCH 2022

ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES

In association with

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

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FOREWORD

DAVID PHILLIPS

Managing Director, City & Guilds and ILM

As a leading global brand for learning and assessment in leadership, management and coaching, ILM's aim is to support organisations to harness leadership, management and coaching skills and behaviours in their people, to develop careers, and to deliver a positive impact. We are delighted to have partnered with the Association of Colleges (AoC) to bring you this report to uncover the essential role that middle leaders play in driving positive impact within the college community. As we emerge from the pandemic and reflect on 2 years of uncertainty and constant change, this report seeks to identify the current levels of support, development and investment into middle management in the Further Education (FE) sector and the effectiveness of the initiatives already in place, so that we can ensure individuals have the skills they need to manage effectively and are able to access opportunities to progress.

Working closely with many colleges in England, it was no surprise to me that the report congratulates the remarkable contribution FE middle leaders have made within colleges, not least, their recent commitment to learners during the pandemic. The rewarding nature of the job is a vital aspect for employees in the sector, and this is, in part, driven by values. Our recent report, *Leading through values*, found that when values are embedded, organisations have a stronger workplace culture that is inclusive and people focused and enables people and the business to grow.

"Middle leaders are working on the 'front line' and are closer to the challenges and pressures of the college than their senior counterparts."

In the college context, middle leaders are working on the 'front line' and are closer to the challenges and pressures of the college, than their senior counterparts. They are likely to be balancing people leadership and resource management. In this research, we wanted to understand how senior and middle leaders work together to turn strategic thinking into action. To what extent do senior leaders communicate and delegate strategy to the middle tier, and what development is required to upskill them to be a part of strategic planning as well as implementation, bridging the leadership gap and creating progression opportunities?

Exacerbated by recent turbulent times, there is a danger that, without the proper training, middle tier staff can become overwhelmed by struggles associated with people management and lack of resources. While senior leaders are navigating the pace of change and are experiencing and addressing wider pressures, the middle tier role becomes reactive and predominantly operational.

The research highlights the need for clearer appreciation from senior managers of the pressures they are facing, and of their longer-term professional development needs. Our recommendations call for the sector to take action to assess and recognise middle leaders' professional development, in particular their leadership development needs to prevent them becoming isolated, feeling undervalued, overburdened and potentially marginalised.

As I reflect on the sector's dynamic responses to the crisis, I know we can all feel proud of the extraordinary contribution our colleges make to the wider community. With the right actions to protect our valuable workforce by recognising, investing in and addressing the development needs of middle leaders, I am convinced we can support the long-term prosperity of our colleges, enabling the sector to reach more learners and impact lives.

"With the right actions to protect our valuable workforce by recognising, investing in and addressing the development needs of middle leaders, we can support the long-term prosperity of our colleges."

KIRSTI LORD

Deputy Chief Executive, Association of Colleges

Middle leaders are critical to the successful delivery of any college's mission, vision and values, often responsible for areas with thousands of students and multi-million pound budgets. Simply put, middle managers are the ambassadors for the strategic vision of the college, providing support and challenge to their teams to realise that vision, celebrating their successes and being accountable for any failures.

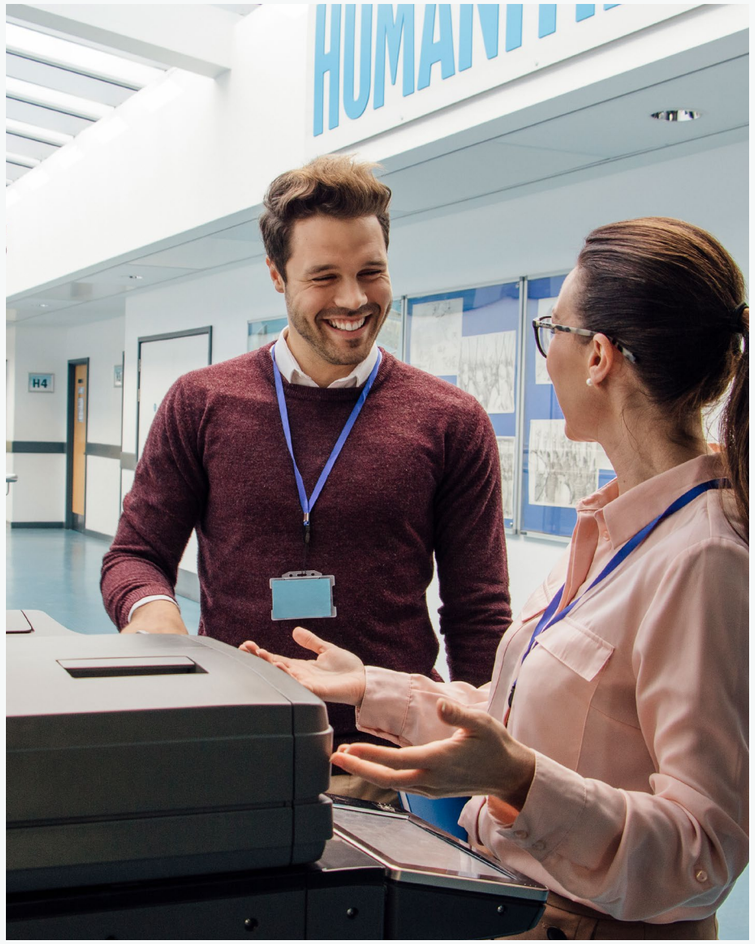
And that really is the simple version – add in writing and delivering a business plan; budget management; data analysis; self-assessment reports; people management; connecting intent, implementation and impact from the senior team through to student experience; working with employers; innovating in delivery and marketing; adapting to constant policy and curriculum change; balancing discipline with encouragement for disengaged students; not to mention that for some, there will still be a requirement to teach - and it is clear to see that a complex set of skills and knowledge is required.

"Middle managers are the ambassadors for the strategic vision of the college"

Middle management in colleges has become an increasingly tough job, with most colleges struggling to compete with salaries in similar roles in schools or universities. For many subject areas the promise of earning more in industry without any management responsibility can be a real retention challenge. Over the last decade, career pathways have become much less clear and as budgets have become tighter, structures have flattened, creating bigger steps between levels, whilst mergers have reduced the chances of finding a commutable promotion opportunity.

This report is therefore timely and crucial. The investment needed both from colleges and from government in developing middle leaders to excel - and for many, to look for progression - is vital. This tier represents the senior leaders of the future and will be replacing those well-established principals and chief executives who often had the opportunity to learn in a smaller college, in slightly better financial times; a luxury aspiring leaders today do not have. It is therefore crucial that they are adequately prepared and retained to lead a buoyant sector, providing the skills needed for the country well into the future.

"The investment needed both from colleges and from government in developing middle leaders to excel - and for many, to look for progression - is vital"



HIGHLIGHTS

3 JOB FAMILIES

- Curriculum
- Learner Services
- MIS

4 KEY THEMES

- The attraction of middle leadership
- The sustaining of interest and commitment to the role
- Professional development and the middle leader
- Role expectations:
  a) People leadership
  b) Resource management
  c) Professional development

12 RECOMMENDATIONS

INVESTING IN MIDDLE LEADERS

1. Establish a leadership qualification framework for the middle tier

2. Formalise mentoring and coaching

3. Encourage middle leadership networks

ADDRESSING THE DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF MIDDLE LEADERS

4. Evaluate middle leaders' development needs annually

5. Focus equally on the strategic and operational elements of middle leadership

6. Prioritise leadership for succession planning

7. Design leadership development with reference to the priorities of the Ofsted (2021) education inspection framework

8. Delegate leadership alongside the appropriate resources and authority

9. Support middle leaders to engage with internal and external stakeholders

RECOGNISING MIDDLE LEADERS

10. Evaluate middle leaders' workload, expectations and conditions of service

11. Provide specific support for the development of MIS middle leaders

12. Review and recognise the career path for Learner Services middle leaders

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1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Working in partnership, the Association of Colleges, ILM - part of the City & Guilds Group - and the University of Nottingham undertook this research with two objectives. First, to help shape FE policy and practice, and secondly to contribute to an evidence base for policy-makers that will generate further investment in the professional development of middle leaders. A key question lies at the heart of this research: 'What should the system offer to support, develop and reward effective leadership in the middle tier in colleges?'. The challenge and ambition to foster a notion of creative excellence within the middle tier are laudable, but in the context of the constraints of progressive accountability measures and bureaucracy, the evidence base needs to be strong if the resource factors relating to our conclusions and recommendations are to be addressed.

"A key question lies at the heart of this research: 'What should the system offer to support, develop and reward effective leadership in the middle tier in colleges?'

The broader training and development needs facing the sector are significant, and they were considered in detail by the *ETF (2018)*. ETF's findings reinforce the view that if colleges are going to be able to attract and retain people to serve the sector's needs, a well-managed and highly skilled workforce is required in which professional development and training can and do play a key part. Similarly, the professional development needs of the middle tier are important if the sector is to manage the leadership pipeline effectively. Linked to this is a need to give consideration of staff turnover within the sector and then specifically within the middle leadership tier - turnover which as highlighted in the *AoC College Workforce Survey (2021)* was 11.1% in 2019/20.

This research explored how colleges support their middle leaders, nurture leadership and develop policies and initiatives to support them. The work builds on the key features of ILM's research *'Leading through challenging times' (2021)* and *'Leading through Values (2021)*. At the heart of these reports is a desire to ensure that organisations are values-driven. The reports acknowledge that values shape key aspects of organisational culture and that when shared, they can help drive success; 'Leading through challenging times' (2021) for example focused on leadership during the pandemic, making recommendations for best practice leadership. Similarly, the reports highlight that leadership skills and competencies need to be embedded at all levels of an organisation and that through effective team development, teamworking and a shared understanding of the challenges being faced, organisations are better placed to respond effectively to future crises.

Of consideration in this research is also the level of preparedness for middle leadership, in relation to the contemporary professional expectations of both those aspiring to and those occupying these positions. This point, when linked to what is now the failure to establish a set of national professional standards and/or expectations for FE middle leaders since incorporation, are factors that we have considered alongside the issues associated with inconsistent levels of training and development - both in relation to leadership and to the operational management responsibilities of the college middle tier.

This research centred on middle leaders in student, customer and regulatory-facing roles, namely those in Curriculum, MIS and Learner Services positions. Its purpose was to develop a clear insight into the following themes:

- The attraction of middle leadership
- The sustaining of interest and commitment to the role
- Professional development and the middle leader
- An appreciation of role expectations: people, resource management and development

"Leadership skills and competencies need to be embedded at all levels of an organisation."

The middle leader of today is part of a sector shaped by incorporation (1993), marketisation and competition. From a position in 1993 when there were 450 Colleges in England *(AoC, 2018)*, today there are 232 colleges *(AoC, 2021)*. Mergers are a pervasive feature of the FE landscape, and they are not a wholly recent phenomenon, viewed in part as a product of the dynamics of the FE market that have led to 'rescue' (due to college viability) or as 'strategic' (to meet local needs). The latter being a product, but not exclusively so, of the Area Based Reviews (HMG, 2015) which led to the current peak in mergers (29) in 2017 (DfE, 2019).

"Some middle leaders have an increased span of control and a wider set of duties, expectations and 'outcomes' depending on the nature of the role they undertake."

Middle leaders reside within this changing and challenging landscape, within which there are flatter organisational structures than in the past. Some middle leaders have an increased span of control and a wider set of duties, expectations and 'outcomes' depending on the nature of the role they undertake. In addition, it is accepted that middle leaders are expected to make a contribution to effective data management. Data management impacts upon core college functions - curriculum planning, learner recruitment, engagement, progression, retention and learner success. It aids effective business planning and development and the perception of quality in what is a very competitive sector (*ESS, 2021*, *Ofsted, 2021*). Implicit therefore in this research was a desire to understand more clearly the role identity and contribution of the middle tier in the post-compulsory sector in England.

Today such postholders are playing an increasingly central part in how further education institutions are responding in what is an increasingly dynamic environment. Further, the middle leader experience also needs to be considered in the context of the education inspection framework (Ofsted 2021). The framework has the potential to promote cultural change and to enhance curriculum development processes in colleges through the middle tier. It also serves to encourage increased levels of shared leadership and delegated authority, in particular for those with curriculum team responsibilities. It is also able to acknowledge how at the middle tier colleges evidence the coherent planning and delivery that impacts on learner achievement, progression and employment. In addition, a new wave of reforms is impacting upon the sector and by definition on the middle leadership tier as they seek to balance the operational and strategic expectations placed upon them.

Finally, there has been very little attention given to the question of what the system should offer college middle leaders in terms of support, development and reward. Therefore, in seeking to give a voice to the middle tier in our colleges we have sought to draw attention to their centrality, their current and potential future contribution in our colleges, their leadership development needs and to address the gap in our understanding of how to sustain and reward them so that in the ideal scenario, their career development can be facilitated within their current college.

"There has been very little attention given to the question of what the system should offer college middle leaders in terms of support, development and reward."

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

THE MIDDLE LEADER TODAY

The concept of middle leaders and middle leadership in colleges is a relatively recent phenomenon. They interface with senior leaders as well as with staff and learners, and they serve day-to-day needs whilst helping to shape policies in their college and enact them. This 'inbetweenness' (*O'Leary et al, 2019, p.31*) can generate multiple demands and pressures that have consequences for middle leaders relating to performance, professional credibility, well-being and retention.

"They interface with senior leaders as well as with staff and learners, and they serve day-to-day needs whilst helping to shape policies in their college and enact them."

There is however a gap in our knowledge and appreciation of their contribution as well of their professional development and support needs. This has driven us to reflect upon the core principles, models and typologies of the past that surround the role of the middle leader. As part of the sense-making process it has been important to hear their voices in order to be able to offer a more sustainable, dynamic and reflective consideration of this important tier in our colleges.

The middle leader works in what is an increasingly performative culture within the sector, which has led to issues of role perception and of expectation. Performance expectation resides in part within job descriptions but also in the relationship between middle leaders, their line managers, their team as a whole and their staff on an individual basis. There are also issues to evaluate related to capacity, capability and their longer-term professional needs, as well career progression and a conscious consideration of succession planning. Linked to this is the longstanding debate about role perception in relation to whether we are discussing management or leadership that in turn can shape expectation.

Matt Gavin of Harvard Business School (2019) has suggested there is overlap between management and leadership and others, such as Bush (2010), feel that in practice the only difference is a semantic one. If we add in the increased expectation on the middle tier to influence others as well as to enact policy and make decisions, then role clarity (as in job descriptions) is important to both the employer and the employee.

The modern Further Education sector, and those charged with ensuring its contribution to the economy and society as a whole, has proved to be resilient and responsive in its generic mission to provide educational opportunities to young people, adults and employers within a diverse range of settings (*Social Market Foundation, 2019*). Central to the success of each college is effective leadership and leadership practices have evolved in an environment fraught with risk and financial constraints. At the same time college leaders have been expected to drive improvements in teaching standards, learner outcomes, learner progression, employment and by definition, the life chances of students.

APPROACHES TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The sector has a long history of providing or facilitating leadership development training programmes for its staff; the drive to do so serving to ensure improved organisational performance within the context and culture of the organisation and addressing the needs of the individual concerned (*Behavioural Insights Team, 2018*). Some of the development programmes are designed and delivered wholly internally, others are accredited as well as unaccredited and delivered off site. The drive to undertake leadership training can be a product of an agreed development plan for a member of staff or equally be initiated at an individual level as part of a conscious desire to enhance their knowledge, understanding and appreciation of a range of aspects of educational leadership, a cross section of which are listed in **Appendix 1**.

Similarly, such an investment can serve to enhance organisational culture and adaptability from the perspective that leaders who take an 'adaptive' approach can leverage key leadership practices and can navigate the challenges of uncertain educational environments effectively (Seah et al, 2014).

"Leaders who take an 'adaptive' approach can leverage key leadership practices and can navigate the challenges of uncertain educational environments effectively."

These points were in effect drawn together by the *Social Market Foundation (2021)* through the theme of 'Policies for strong leadership in Further Education colleges'. In this work they identified five channels through which government and the sector could work to strengthen FE leadership, four of which are of direct relevance to this research:

1. Supporting and developing current leaders
2. Improving the leadership pipeline in FE
3. Bringing effective leaders in from outside the sector
4. Changing the culture: making FE leadership roles more attractive

— *(Social Market Foundation, 2021, p.13)*

A multiplicity of possible leadership approaches has been used by college leaders. *Jowitt and Westerman (2007)* sought to capture some of the common factors to explain the leadership approach of seven 'outstanding' FE colleges at that time. They were:

1. A clear and simple mission to which all subscribe and relate
2. A commitment to improving quality by placing the learner at the heart of the process
3. Having the right people on board
4. A clear and strong sense of individual and corporate values
5. A clear understanding of the division of labour between governors, senior managers, and middle managers
6. The crucial importance of data to improve performance

LEADERSHIP STYLE AND LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS IN A TIME OF CRISIS

In reality, leadership style and leadership effectiveness are invariably contingent on context (*Greatbatch and Tate, 2018*), and leading through a pandemic has focused senior leaders' minds on how to lead effectively in a time of crisis. The crisis also served to reinforce *Gurr and Drysdale's (2020, p.27)* point that 'good leaders are able to make sense of ambiguous situations'; this of course is a point that can be expanded to include leadership at all levels in a college – from classroom to boardroom in uncertain times before, during and potentially beyond the pandemic. It could be added that the experience also reflected *Dennis et al's (2020)* conclusion that established college principals were at that time optimistic about the future of the sector and of their ability to interpret and come to grips with the complexity, possibilities and the precariousness of the present.

It is also rational to suggest that the pandemic served to promote increased levels of 'distributed leadership' (*Spillane, 2005*) in what was at the time a remotely-led sector. The concept could be said to represent a pragmatic response to task distribution given the complexity of modern-day college leadership, enhanced to new levels in a time of extreme crisis. Increased levels of delegation to middle leaders who had 'lateral influence among peers' (Pearce and Sims, 2002, p.176) represented both a challenge and an opportunity to college leaders. More than that though, the pandemic may have also signalled to college leaders that the traditional view of leaders ('vertical leadership'), (*Yukl, 1999*), was ripe for reviewing as it reaffirmed the view that leadership capacity, capability and a shared commitment to a college's future could be a product of something greater that individualistic notions of leadership.

"Leadership capacity, capability and a shared commitment to a college's future could be a product of something greater that individualistic notions of leadership."

A serious reflection on leadership style can encourage leaders to focus on the longer-term leadership development needs of the college as a whole. Further, a crisis such as the pandemic can promote a more sustainable approach to leadership. The importance of leading better and differently in a crisis prompted Professor Laura Galloway of Edinburgh Business School to call distributed leadership '*the triumph of lockdown*'. This perspective can be considered in parallel with the economic case for investing in the middle tier in colleges to improve 'the leadership pipeline' (*Social Market Foundation, 2021, p.7*) which has the potential to motivate and engage middle leaders and sustain their commitment to their college.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON MIDDLE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

"The universal nature of the issues relating to leading from the middle generates and opportunity to consider the matter from an international perspective"

The universal nature of the issues relating to leading from the middle generates an opportunity to consider the matter from an international perspective, both to reinforce our understanding as well as to help us to evaluate differently the issues and approaches to the professional development of key postholders. Within the literature, development in relation to middle leadership in the United States of America stood out as being worthy of further consideration and illustration in this report.

American Community Colleges have been in existence for more than 100 years and the majority were founded in the 1960s. They were initially intended to provide the first two years of postsecondary education but also delivered 'terminal education' (Eells, 1941), an alternative to transfer to four-year colleges that prepared students to enter the workforce. The vocational mission took hold and eventually expanded to include both credit- and non-credit bearing workforce development (Cohen et al., 2014). Similar to the mission of English Further Education colleges, they have consistently functioned as low-cost, open-access institutions that provide educational opportunity to everyone regardless of preparation, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, or gender.

As the purposes of Community Colleges have changed, more attention has been given to leadership development in general as a process that differentiates between developing leaders and developing leadership. This approach puts greater emphasis on 'the pipeline' (*Eddy & Mitchell, 2017, p.131*) when contemplating preparing tomorrow's leaders. The situation that has emerged in US Community Colleges regarding the complex leadership challenge being faced will resonate with college principals in England. Alfred and Sydow (2013, p.48) for example suggest that they exist in a 'condition of paradox'. The paradox being a desire and need to increase access, provide more and better services, and to improve outcomes with fewer resources and decreased funding. In essence, it is a sector where leaders are attempting to move forward while confined to organisational structures that do not align with the college's needs and expectations. This led to the view that college leaders need to learn to live with this paradox and at the same time leaders at all levels must first transform their own notions of leading before being able to lead transformational change.

In 2005, 2013 and 2018 the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) provided an outline for the key areas of leadership work in Community Colleges. They highlight six competencies for effective leadership in 2005:

1. Organisational strategy
2. Resource management
3. Communication
4. Collaboration
5. Community college advocacy
6. Professionalism

In 2018 these initial six competences we extended further to 11 (*AACC, 2018, pp.21-35*) and within this report there was an emphasis on coaching and mentoring for all levels of leadership (p.5). *The AACC John E. Roueche Future Leaders Institute* also delivers a 3-day seminar designed for department chairs, deans, assistant/associate deans, or directors who look to advance into a senior leadership role.

At a state level in the USA, what is happening for and on behalf of California's 115 Community Colleges is of interest and in their *Vision for Success (2017)* paper they emphasised the importance to foster middle leadership development. In 2008 they developed a series of system-wide initiatives that proved to be the catalysed to provide an expanded view of middle leadership. Initially the Basic Skills Initiative Leadership Institute for Curricular and Institutional Transformation (BSILI) programme was introduced in 2009, followed in 2013 by the 'Leading from the Middle' (LFM) programme. Both programmes adhere to the principles of the Guided Pathways model, as described in Redesigning America's Community Colleges (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015) which calls for a model of college structures, procedures, and practices.

Both programmes had a shared understanding of the challenges that community college educators face and a focus on the tools and strategies that are useful to middle leaders, and the experiential process of developing leadership skills. A key feature of both models is that they are structured over a full year and include time away from participants' colleges to allow reflection on their own institutions, promote engagement with peers and consider other perspectives on leadership issues. The approach taken in a Californian context reflected a particular perspective of leadership development that we sought to explore with middle leaders during the interview stage of this research.

The following themes are at the core of both the BSILI and LFM programmes:

THEME	PROGRAMME CONTENT
LEADING BY DOING	Explore common issues Learn about leadership skills and strategies Apply leadership strategies through a change project
BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND COLLABORATE	Engage with peers from other colleges Discuss and learn from a cross section of middle leaders' experiences Assess a longer-term view of the leadership of change in colleges
PREPARING TO LEAD INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE	Review of what shapes and impedes the change process The promotion of reflection on strategic and intentional planning Focus on the importance of resilience in relation to the resistance to change that may be encountered

An overarching aim of the programmes is to increase both the knowledge and confidence of what it means to be a leader. This includes the development of 'leadership identity', which in effect is the acknowledgement of the professional journey that middle leaders are undergoing and reflective of how their leadership identity and style is developing. For more on this initiative in California please see *Asera (2019)* 'The power of middle leaders in community colleges: Why now is the time to foster middle leadership'.

OUTCOMES

What comes across in our consideration of aspects of the modern history of the English Further Education sector and the literature reviewed, is that middle leaders, like all leaders as *ILM (2020)* have highlighted, are leading in challenging times. The nature of the challenge they are facing more generally is a product of the speed of change that the sector is experiencing. More specifically this includes its policy, political and financial context linked to sector-wide desire, locally interpreted, to either maintain or improve every aspect of college life for the community each college serves. Middle leaders will have been recruited because of their knowledge, skills, experience and potential as well as their ability to make their contribution to the operational running of one key part of the college. Their professional development needs are changing rapidly and will be being addressed in a variety of ways.

Middle leaders will have been employed to lead, co-ordinate, develop and support others to varying degrees. Through their roles they will be growing and developing professionally in order to add value to their college as a whole, but initially through and with the team they lead. All middle leadership roles are multi-layered, complex and rewarding, each of them are supported by a designated line manager and many middle leaders have access to a range of structured professional development opportunities.

For these reasons and others posed in the introduction it is timely therefore to ask middle leaders the following:

- How they view their roles
- To reflect on what attracted them to become a middle leader
- To consider what sustains them in their role
- To evaluate what they value and need in terms of professional development to ensure a continued talent pipeline through English FE.

In addition, we were aware that everyone who serves the needs of learners and engages with stakeholders in the FE sector has been impacted upon by COVID – 19. In a period of unprecedented challenge, all the staff in our colleges have needed to react, plan and contribute in a manner that ensured and continues to ensure the continuity of care, teaching and support that our learners, staff and colleagues have needed and continue to need today. This new reality has inevitably been reflected in aspects of our findings and in our engagement with middle leaders through this research.

"The nature of the challenge [middle leaders] are facing more generally is a product of the speed of change that the sector is experiencing...this includes its policy, political and financial context."

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the first instance, middle leaders in Curriculum, MIS and Learner Services roles at all AoC member colleges were approached to complete a survey using a 7-point Likert scale. The survey comprised of 55 questions spread across four themes:

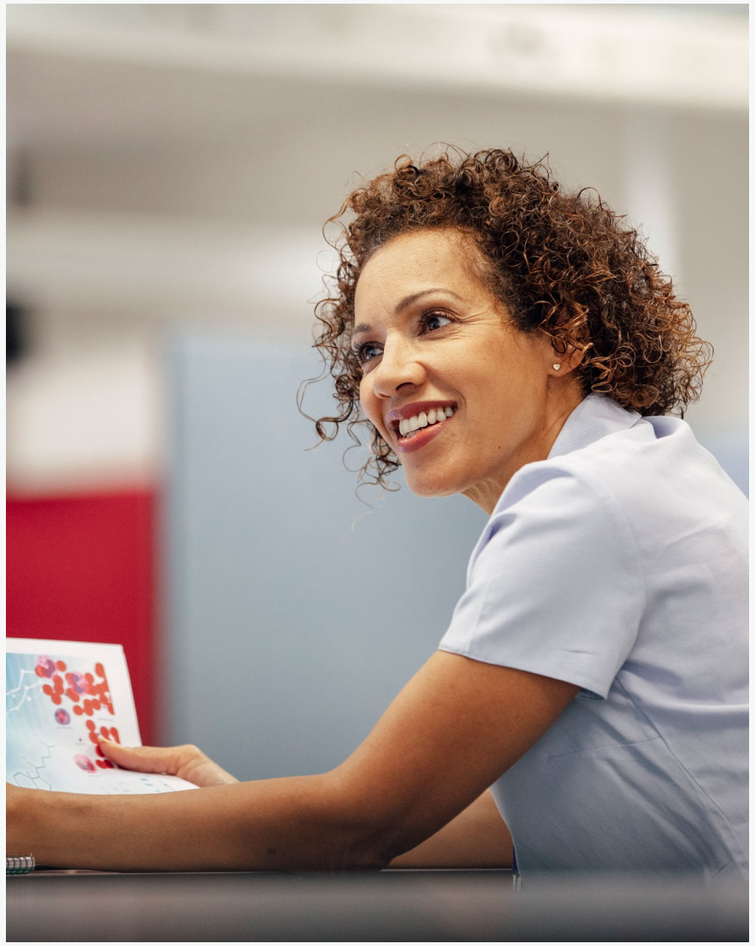
1. The attraction of middle leadership
2. Sustaining interest and commitment
3. Professional development
4. Role expectations.

There was the opportunity to add comments (free text) at the end of the survey. We received 235 completed replies to the survey, and they were representative of all seven AoC regions. The data was then disaggregated to provide an analysis by job family i.e. those in Learner Services, MIS, Curriculum or other roles. We received responses from 52 middle leaders who were in 'other roles' and we analysed these responses as part of the data set as a whole.

After an initial analysis of the data, eight middle leaders, representative of the three key role families noted above and who had expressed a desire to engage in further discussion, were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview via Microsoft Teams to explore the following related themes:

- The enjoyment, challenge and empowering nature of their role
- Team leading, team culture and the work/life balance
- The identification and support of their professional development needs
- The middle leadership experience and next steps in their career.

The questions used in the semi-structured interview are provided in **Appendix 2**.



Preliminary research findings were presented at AoC's annual conference in November 2021. The final part of the research strategy was to obtain the perspectives of senior expert colleagues at AoC, Ofsted, the Further Education Commissioner's office, the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the National Association for Managers of Student Services (NAMSS). Their input drew on the contribution that middle leaders make in colleges within the context of the regulatory, policy and operational environment.

4 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this section we report by the four themes in relation to the survey data in the first instance. We then draw upon the interview data to illustrate the key points made by interviewees as well as exploring the similarities or issues that emerge for those in Curriculum, Learner Services and MIS team leader roles.

Theme 1

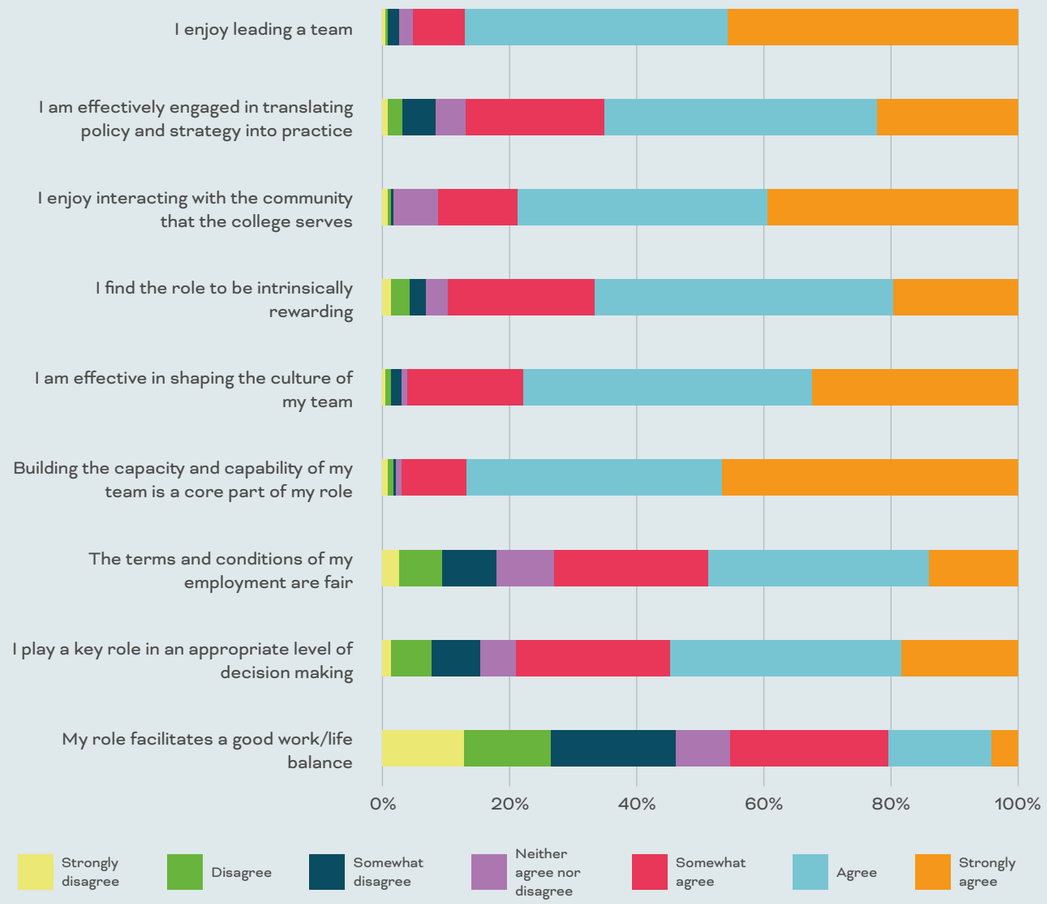
THE ATTRACTION OF MIDDLE LEADERSHIP

An important starting point for this research was to learn what middle leaders enjoy about their role. This included perspectives from leading a team through to building a team culture and developing the capacity and capability of those they manage. We also sought to understand something about the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that middle leaders gained from their role and the contribution to their college's success with and through their teams.

It was positive to see that the survey data confirmed all categories of middle leaders enjoyed leading a team (95%). This extended to playing a part in translating policy into practice (87%) and engaging with the community that the college serves (80%). This highlights a key leadership contribution to the college as a whole, with Curriculum and Learner Services middle leaders being particularly conspicuous in doing so due to the nature of their roles. They also viewed their role as intrinsically rewarding and they valued playing a central part in developing the capacity and capability of their team and in interacting with the community that their college serves. **Figure 1** opposite highlights the survey data for all respondents.

"[Middle leaders] also viewed their role as intrinsically rewarding and they valued playing a central part in developing the capacity and capability of their team and in interacting with the community that their college serves."

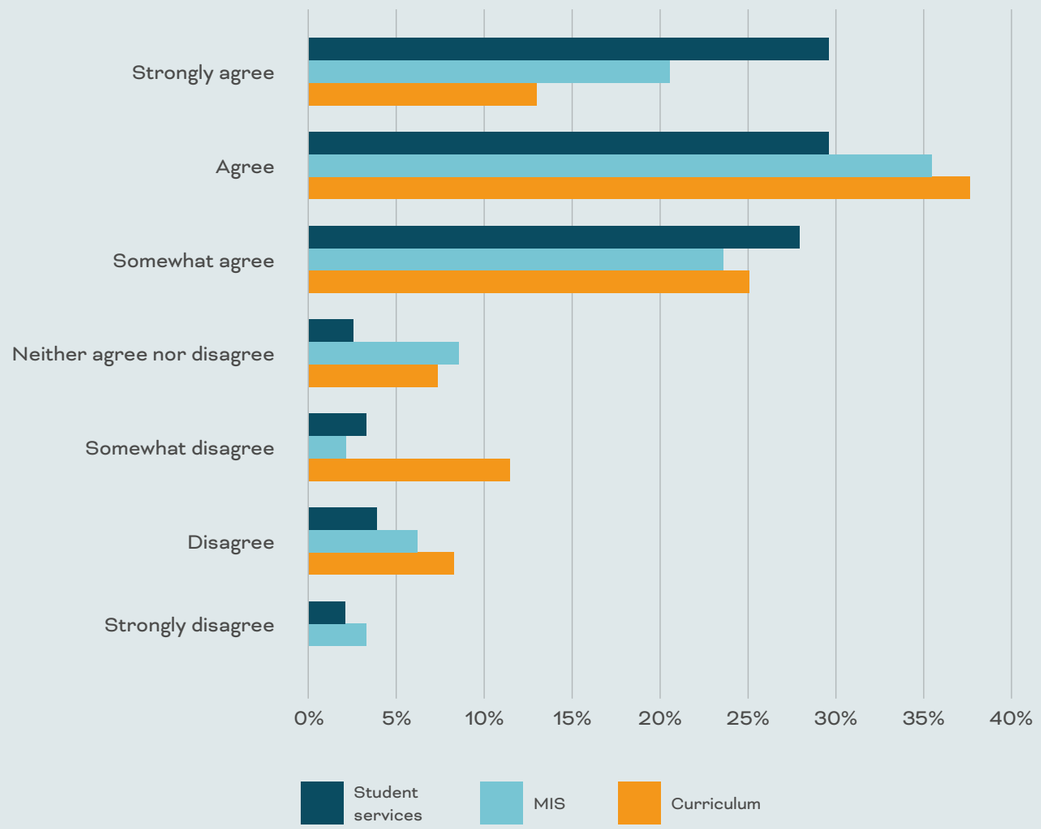
FIGURE 1. The attraction of middle leadership



Interestingly, from a broader leadership perspective, being effective in shaping the culture of the team was something that 79% of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with; not an easy challenge to rise to well. Given this very positive data it was perhaps not surprising to learn that commitment to their work role impacted negatively on the work/life balance for 27% of respondents, with only 20% agreeing/strongly agreeing that their role facilitated a good work/life balance. Similarly, the issue of work/life balance, a product potentially of both their commitment and organisational expectations is something that is also addressed later in the report.

From a senior leadership perspective this data could be said to confirm that the right people are undertaking these key roles in our colleges and that they are engaged both strategically and operationally. In addition, 79% of respondents feel that they play a key role in an appropriate level of decision making which was encouraging, particularly so the Learner Services leaders (87%) – see **Figure 2** below.

FIGURE 2. 'I play a key role in an appropriate level of decision-making' - responses by job family



For me (this job) it is about creating that work family where people want to come to work because they feel part of a bigger picture. I am supporting students in a real working environment. And they're only in the classroom for about half of their studies. And I love seeing those students succeed.

CURRICULUM TEAM LEADER

The main thing I really enjoy I have to say is we have these learners come in who have these difficulties and you see them progress. The other good thing is you see them change. Half of my job is just dealing with learners without plans who just have, say, dyslexia, dyscalculia, social, emotional, mental health issues. It is basically making sure those learners who you get through and who you work with every year achieve the best possible outcomes.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

The one thing I like about the role is that information and data enables a lot of people to make decisions. And I like the fact that I can actually enable the team to process accurate and timely data that maybe some people think is mainly around funding compliance around data integrity.

MIS TEAM LEADER

There is always something different that pops up that needs doing, something else to learn. There are many things changing in my department, which can be annoying sometimes, it's like that in my area – but yes, I like it.

MIS TEAM LEADER

KEY POINTS

1. THERE IS A CLEAR AWARENESS THAT CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY BUILDING IS AT THE HEART OF THE TEAM LEADER ROLE
2. WHEN GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TEAM LEADERS VALUE TRANSLATING POLICY INTO PRACTICE
3. TEAM LEADERS ENJOY THEIR ROLE, AND THEY FIND IT INTRINSICALLY REWARDING
4. THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE ROLE ARE BROADLY VIEWED AS FAIR
5. THERE IS AN ISSUE WITH TEAM LEADERS' WORK/LIFE BALANCE
6. WIDER STAKEHOLDER AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IS A HIGHLY ENJOYABLE ASPECT OF THE ROLE OF TEAM LEADER.

Theme 2

THE SUSTAINING OF INTEREST AND COMMITMENT TO THE ROLE

A job might be attractive and the motivation to do well might be strong in the short to medium term. However, to sustain interest and commitment to a role over time can be challenging. Hopefully, it is a challenge that senior leaders appreciate all staff can face, teaching and non-teaching, as well as middle leaders. Consequently, it will be a factor that they are keen to address. Obtaining data from middle leaders on this key theme helped to shed light on the relationship with line managers more broadly as well as providing a vehicle to show to what degree they were valued, rewarded and given the space to lead.

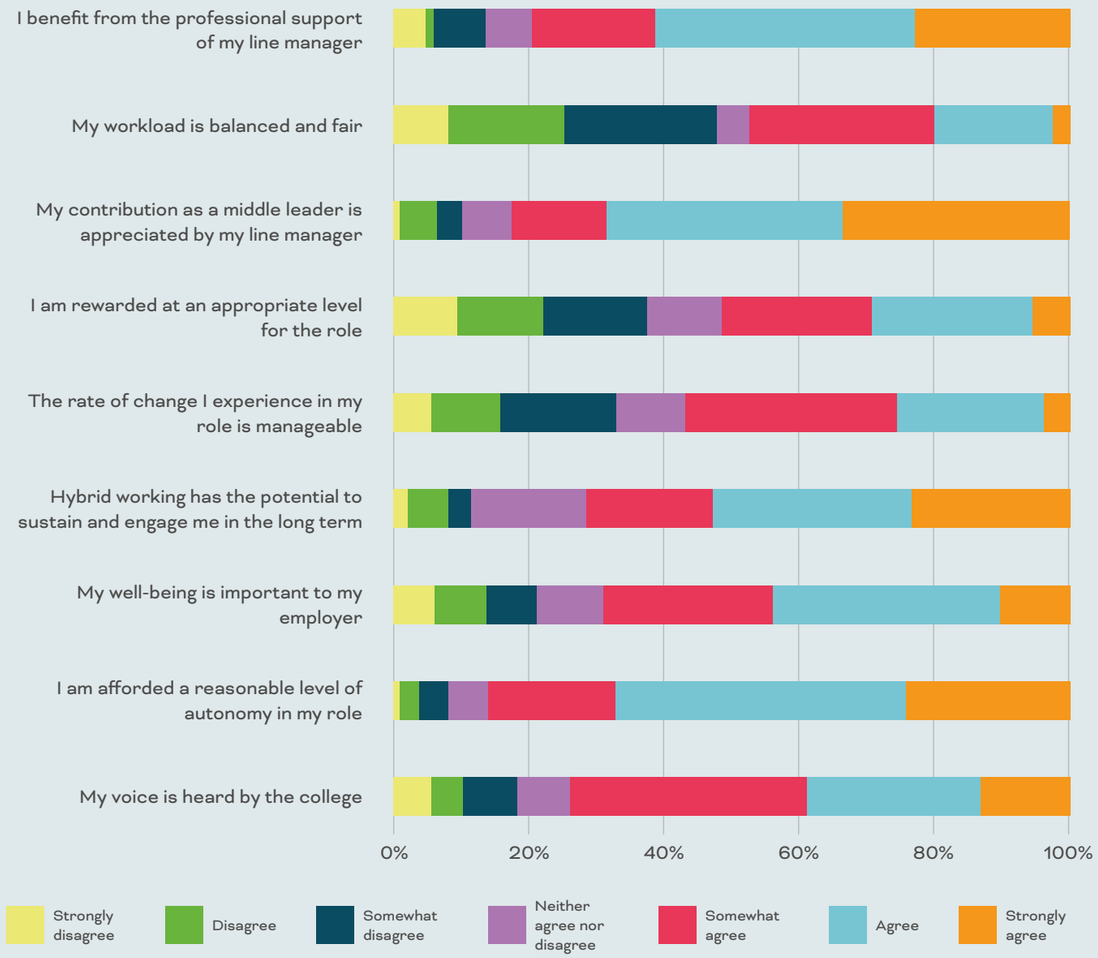
The responses to questions relating to professional support from the line manager, being appreciated by their line manager and being afforded a reasonable level of autonomy in their role scored highest in this section (61%). The level of autonomy in their role (67% either agree/strongly agree) could also be said to reflect a good level of trust in middle leaders from senior staff. Linked to these responses was an acknowledgement that hybrid working had the potential of sustaining middle leaders in their role.

If we consider the level of professional autonomy or agency as a product of a range of factors, such as culture, trust and competence - and in the context of the pandemic, necessity - then it was interesting to note that 86% of all middle leaders felt that they were afforded a reasonable level of autonomy in their role and 92% of Learner Services middle leaders reported that they felt that had a high degree of autonomy. **Figure 3** overleaf highlights the survey data for all respondents.

86%

of all middle leaders felt that they were afforded a reasonable level of autonomy in their role

FIGURE 3. Sustaining interest and commitment



Given the broader issue of the high rate of change that the sector is experiencing, colleges can take comfort from the fact that 56% of the respondents felt that what they were experiencing was 'manageable'. However, with 32% feeling that the rate of change was not manageable with 48% feeling that their workload was unfair and 33% feeling that they were not being rewarded at an appropriate level for the role, these are key points for senior leaders to consider in the longer term if commitment, if not interest, within college middle leadership is to be sustained.

Some issues were raised more broadly relating to the sustaining of interest in middle leader roles, both via the survey data and in some of the interviews. For example, the potential impact of perceived excessive workload - which logically links to work/life balance - was a concern that was broadly shared by each category of middle leader surveyed (49%). This which could in part be related to the rate of change that they are experiencing. Therefore, when considered overall for all three categories of middle leader, workload and the rate of change are key pressures and when it came to the level of reward for Curriculum leaders, that registered the highest level of concern. 43% felt that they were not being rewarded appropriately enough in relation to what was being expected of them as middle leaders.

"The potential impact of perceived excessive workload - which logically links to work/life balance - was a concern that was broadly shared by each category of middle leader surveyed (49%)."

I'm very much trusted to do the right thing and make the right decisions. If I think things aren't working I feel I can say so and I have, and it wasn't viewed in a negative way.

CURRICULUM TEAM LEADER

One of the biggest challenges I think for me and my role has been lack of agency. When I was in private industry I would have decisions (to make) and have been held accountable for it. Whereas in my role at the moment lots of people have to get involved in decision making even when I can clearly see that there is a strong business case.

MIS TEAM LEADER

I'm totally caught in a hamster wheel and it's not uncomfortable, but I need to keep running in order to maintain my life.

CURRICULUM TEAM LEADER

Our recruitment figures aren't great this year. Everyone's working this Saturday on an enrolment event and you're told that six hours before you finish on a Friday and it's like it's having an impact not just on me or my staff, to be fair. My staff are very good, we share these events around, but it has an impact on the team as a whole.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

They (SMT) have this vision of what they want and that's fine, because I will do that. Obviously we generally work together, but sometimes it does feel like they don't know enough about the intricacies of how long everything takes, how complicated it is. So, yes, sometimes I don't feel important.

MIS TEAM LEADER

I've I always been used to work and I was working 50 to 55 hour weeks when the pandemic hit. My working hours are just crazy and what I've really found in sort of the past couple of years is because we've struggled to recruit posts and I've ended up being operational between 9.00am and 5:00pm and then I do my job in the evening and at weekends and that's really exhausting.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

I do feel empowered to make those decisions, it's about understanding what framework you're operating in as well and to know where to get strategic guidance when it's needed.

MIS TEAM LEADER

KEY POINTS

1. CURRICULUM LEADERS ARE AFFORDED A HIGH LEVEL OF AUTONOMY IN THEIR ROLES – BUT MIS TEAM LEADERS SIGNIFICANTLY LESS SO
2. THE CONTRIBUTION THAT MIDDLE LEADERS ARE MAKING IS APPRECIATED BY THEIR LINE MANAGERS ALTHOUGH THIS IS MARGINALLY LOWER FROM THE MIS LEADERS' PERSPECTIVE
3. THE RATE OF CHANGE THAT MIDDLE LEADERS ARE EXPERIENCING IS BROADLY MANAGEABLE
4. THE LEVEL OF REWARD MIDDLE LEADERS ARE RECEIVING IS LESS THAN IDEAL IN THE OPINION OF NEARLY 50% OF CURRICULUM MIDDLE LEADERS
5. AN EXCESSIVE WORKLOAD STANDS OUT AS A CONCERN, IN PARTICULAR FOR CURRICULUM MIDDLE LEADERS. ALTHOUGH THIS WAS NOT DUE SOLELY TO WORKING FROM HOME AND COVID 19-RELATED CHALLENGES
6. THE HYBRID MODEL OF WORKING THAT WAS INTRODUCED FROM MARCH 2020 IN MOST COLLEGES HAS THE POTENTIAL TO SUSTAIN MIDDLE LEADERS IN THE LONGER TERM AND IN THE CASE OF MIS MIDDLE LEADERS 94% FEEL THIS WAY, NEARLY 30% HIGHER THAN THE OTHER TWO CATEGORY OF MIDDLE LEADERS
7. THE LEVEL OF PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT FROM LINE MANAGERS IS VIEWED AS BENEFICIAL BY MIDDLE LEADERS
8. THERE IS A STRONG INDICATION THAT THE DEGREE OF AUTONOMY THAT MIDDLE LEADERS ARE EXPERIENCING AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR VOICE BEING HEARD BY SENIOR LEADERS ARE POSITIVE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TOWARDS SUSTAINING INTEREST AND COMMITMENT.

CASE STUDY 1

CHRISTOPHER CADDAMY, DIRECTOR OF REGISTRY SERVICES, CITY COLLEGE NORWICH, EASTON COLLEGE AND PASTON COLLEGE

I have had the pleasure of working in Further Education (FE) in a variety of roles since 1998. My first role was working on reception at the tender age of 18 whilst also completing a degree. Since then, I have worked and managed in a variety of support roles from exams, admissions, business development to MIS. I suppose on reflection I have 'served my apprenticeship' in building knowledge about FE and how different departments work.

"For me, there's no doubt that working in FE has been rewarding but also challenging at times. I can't think of another sector which could equip you with such a wide range of skills and knowledge."

For me, there's no doubt that working in FE has been rewarding but also challenging at times. I can't think of another sector which could equip you with such a wide range of skills and knowledge.
I have worked for four colleges, each different in size, structure and complexity. This journey has taught me that FE colleges are unique, they are special, they are continually adapting and evolving whilst responding to individual challenges, and do so with integrity.

This is what influences me and makes FE special – it's being part of a culture, a way of working, and helping to lead an organisation which plays such vital roles in its communities. Working in these environments has enabled me to draw knowledge and inspiration from fantastic colleagues, managers and leaders I have been lucky enough to work with.

I've got no doubt that these individuals and teams have had the greatest impact on my leadership style and overall ethos. I have also benefited from formal, accredited management programmes as well as some fantastic internal management development programmes which have been designed to develop managers alongside ethos and culture.

It's this combination of formal and informal learning that allows me to lead multi-disciplinary, complex support teams across funding methodologies, ILR coding and exam requirements to ensure our apprentices, students and applicants receive excellent customer service.

Today, I'm able to draw on knowledge and experience to support my colleagues and teams. More importantly I've learnt to appreciate the shared values, culture and ways of working which I see every day as part of a management team at the college which works collaboratively and collectively. These values build successful teams and help me add value to the role.

This way of working allows colleagues to recognise the importance of their role and understand how each role adds value to the organisation. It's vital that team members can build knowledge not just of their specialism but of the college overall whilst understanding the role the college plays within the local community and beyond.

As I have developed as a manager so has my appreciation that the culture of an organisation is central to how a college can effectively adapt to change and support colleagues to respond to everyday challenges. All middle managers play an important role in making this happen but it's the underlying culture that allows managers to make this happen successfully.

"It's this combination of formal and informal learning that allows me to lead multi-disciplinary, complex support teams... to ensure our apprentices, students and applicants receive excellent customer service."

Theme 3

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE MIDDLE LEADER

A commitment to the ongoing professional development of all staff is an integral part of everyday life in colleges, of which leadership development is just one component. Our focus centred on how middle leaders viewed that their professional development needs had been identified and addressed, both generally and specifically, and how they felt they were being supported in relation to their professional development and career progression more broadly.

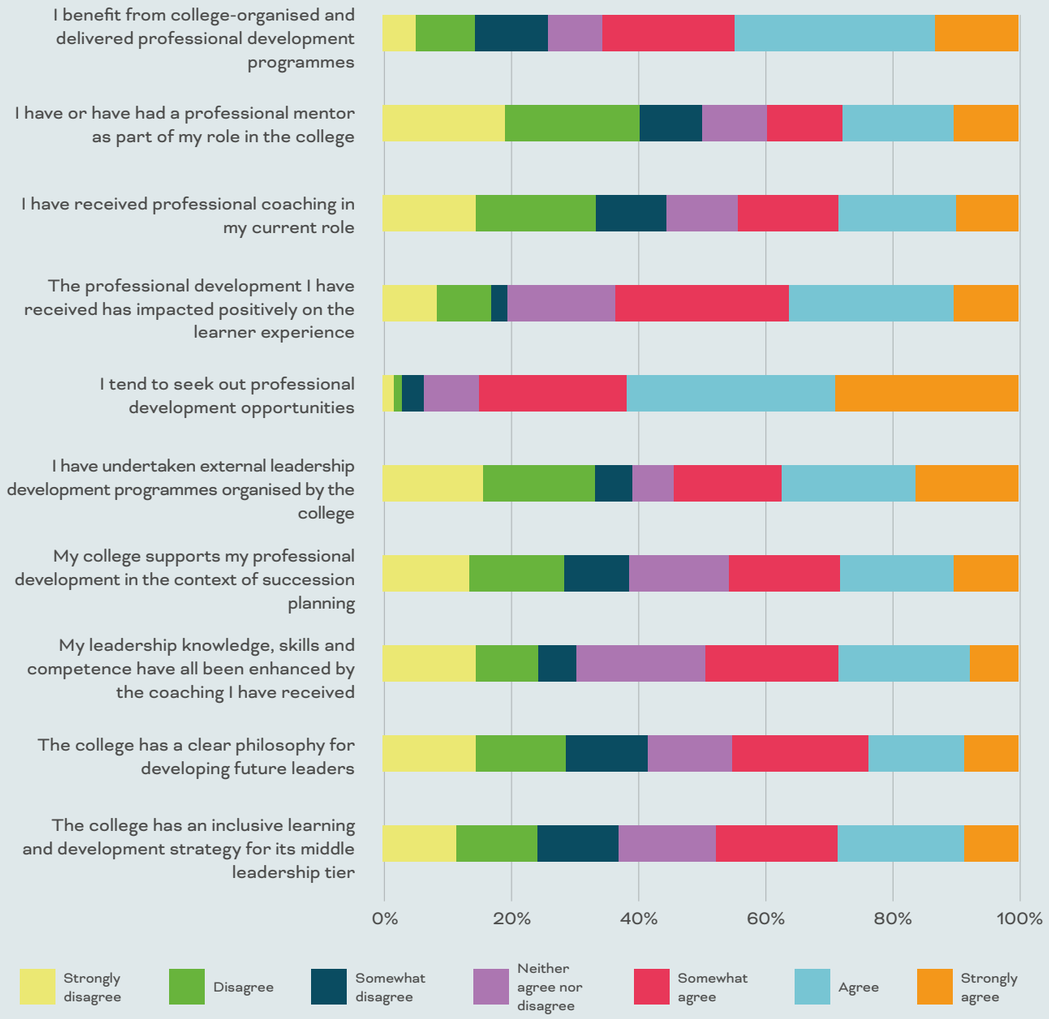
63%

of those who responded felt that the professional development experiences that they had received had impacted directly on the learner experience

One of the overall findings was that all three categories of middle leader presented themselves as being proactive in seeking professional development opportunities. They also felt that their college had a clear philosophy for developing future leaders and that they had benefited to some degree from college organised professional development programmes.

In terms of impact, 63% of those who responded felt that the professional development experiences that they had received had impacted directly on the learner experience. This latter point is particularly important to acknowledge because it underlines the view that middle leaders considered the value of their professional development in terms of how it served to enhance the core purpose of their college as well as themselves. However, there was a key difference reported by job role. 30% of MIS managers felt that their professional development experience had not impacted on the learner. This may have been because they felt their role was not as directly associated with the learner experience – despite it being fundamental to reporting student outcomes - a point that was explored further at the interview stage of this research. **Figure 4** opposite highlights the survey data for all respondents.

FIGURE 4. Professional development and the middle leader



The response to the questions relating to coaching and mentoring - although neither are automatically related to any professional development - highlighted a few key differences by job role that needed to be explored further. Marginally over 40% of all respondents registered have had a mentor allocated to them and yet 47% of the Curriculum leaders had access compared to just 30% of MIS middle leaders and 43% of Learner Services leaders.

The broader picture relating to whether coaching has served to enhance leadership knowledge, skills and competence was reported as broadly positive with the exception of MIS leaders; 65% reported that they had not received any professional coaching. Clearly, how individual colleges define mentoring and coaching and how it is implemented, monitored and reported upon are factors worthy of further consideration. To what extent a middle leader's professional development is linked to either access to mentors and/or coaches is a product of the type and design of leadership development programme that has been provided to or accessed by a middle leader. However, there was a pronounced difference in perception as to whether there had been a correlation between leadership knowledge, skills and competence, and the coaching that had been received. Curriculum leaders (54%) had noted a correlation whereas MIS and Learner Services were less convinced of a positive correlation (MIS, 36%; Learner Services, 46%).

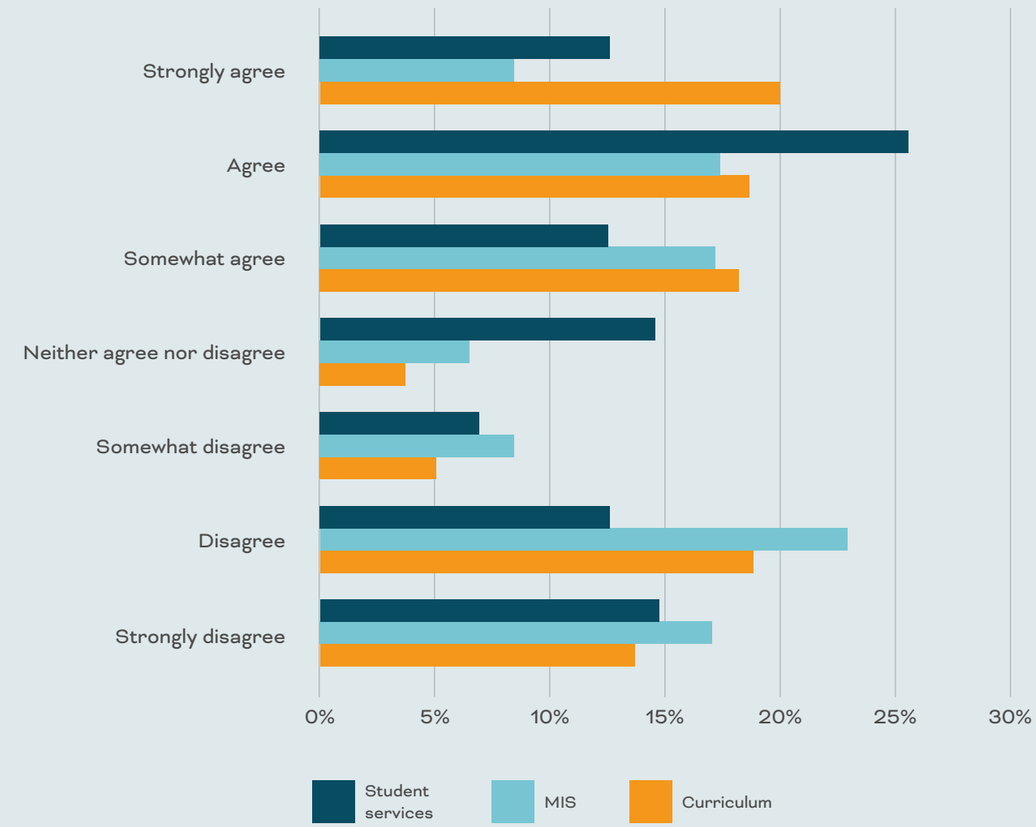
The data suggests that there is a balance of college-initiated/negotiated professional development and self-initiated professional development in place with marginally over 50% of respondents suggesting that they have undertaken a leadership development programme organised by the college. Curriculum leaders registered the strongest participation in college-organised leadership development (58%) followed by Learner Services (52%) and then MIS (45%), all of which is broadly positive (see **Figure 5** opposite).

Taken as a whole, it would appear reasonable to establish if there was a link between a college's philosophy for developing its future leaders, its inclusive learning and development strategy, and its succession planning. This should be part of an overall consideration of both the purpose and the impact of professional development that is either provided to middle leaders or sought by them.

The data suggests that it is the curriculum leaders who most clearly noted a positive connection between each of these elements above although 35% reported that their college's approach to their professional development was not inclusive. Similarly, MIS leaders did not necessarily agree that a clear philosophy existed in relation to their professional development needs (58%) or that the college supported their professional development in the context of succession planning (54%).

What emerges overall from a consideration of the data in this theme is that the broad direction and commitment of colleges to the professional development of middle leaders is a clear priority, and that all three categories of middle leader take their professional development seriously. In addition, middle leaders see the correlation between their professional development and the learner experience clearly. However, the data also indicates that whilst these broad messages are positive, MIS & Learner Services leaders are not wholly convinced that their needs are either being prioritised as part of an inclusive learning and development strategy or are being addressed effectively. Nor are they wholly convinced that they are supported consistently well by mentors or being considered within a wider leadership succession strategy.

FIGURE 5. 'I have undertaken external leadership development programmes organised by the colleges' - responses by job family



"The broad direction and commitment of colleges to the professional development of middle leaders is a clear priority, and that all three categories of middle leader take their professional development seriously. In addition, middle leaders see the correlation between their professional development and the learner experience clearly."

I was empowered to identify my own training needs. The programme I undertook was brilliant. I really enjoyed it and I found the connecting with people from other and different departments, different job roles, excellent. I found it really, really rewarding and that combined with my love of coaching because the programme had a coaching program built within it. We were supposed to visit another college as part of the programme but then the pandemic hit, and it was cancelled.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

My college evaluates my leadership skills in conjunction with me in in 1-1's with my line manager, the Principal, and he thinks that I don't have any development needs. So, I have had to identify things that I want to do that I want to learn about that I want to expand upon and that is why I am doing a part -time Doctorate.

CURRICULUM TEAM LEADER

I don't feel that my professional development needs are being considered. I haven't received any kind of professional training in the time I have been here, two and a half years. To me, my training has been about self-learning. It would be nice to have some professional development, maybe something is out there I just haven't found it yet. I suppose I should do a generic middle leaders course, meet other MIS managers and collaborate a bit more and share what we are doing.

MIS TEAM LEADER

I did the leading from the middle course, which was really good. I found that very useful. I had a mentor, he used to be a college principal. He e-mails me every so often to check in, but he was very good and the course itself was very good and we learned a lot on it. The biggest issue was that it was over very quickly, it was run over the equivalent of 7 whole days but at the end of the day it's been beneficial.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

I hadn't undertaken any kind of leadership training, but I have had a lot of internal training at this and my previous colleges. So, when I recently got made a director I wanted to undertake a leadership programme and that is what I am doing part time at a university. I feel that I need that badge now and I want to check if my beliefs are correct, but I also want to develop myself. So that I've got more of a strategic alignment, I think that's something that's missing off my CV.

MIS TEAM LEADER

I have self-identified my professional development needs. I'm doing a level 5 apprenticeship in leadership. They didn't want me to do it initially, but I wanted it to get some more skills and abilities of knowledge of leadership and the college are supporting me. My line manager is very much on board with it and sees it as a way of developing me as an individual'. I plan to undertake a middle leadership programme next, and I am keen to have a professional mentor – someone from outside of the college.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

KEY POINTS

1. MIDDLE LEADERS OVERALL SEEK OUT AND HAVE BENEFITED FROM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES - BUT MIS LEADERS APPEAR NOT TO HAVE BEEN IN A POSITION TO SEEK SUCH OPPORTUNITIES, OR APPROPRIATE OPPORTUNITIES WERE NOT AVAILABLE

2. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS BOTH ORGANISED AND PROVIDED INTERNALLY AS WELL AS PROVIDED EXTERNALLY, BUT OVERALL, IT IS THE CURRICULUM LEADERS WHO HAVE ENGAGED WITH AND BEEN OFFERED THE MOST DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

3. THERE IS A STRONG BELIEF FROM MIDDLE LEADERS THAT THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THEY HAVE RECEIVED HAS IMPACTED POSITIVELY ON THE LEARNER EXPERIENCE, WITH MIS LEADERS BEING A SIGNIFICANT EXCEPTION

4. THERE IS A BROADLY EFFECTIVE LEVEL OF MENTORING AND COACHING OF MIDDLE LEADERS BEING UNDERTAKEN FOR ALL THREE LEADERSHIP GROUPS BUT THERE IS THE POTENTIAL FOR MORE, IF IT IS LINKED TO A NEGOTIATED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS ANALYSIS

5. THERE IS A CLEAR CORRELATION BETWEEN EFFECTIVE COACHING AND EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP ACROSS THE MIDDLE TIER IN COLLEGES.

6. THERE IS A DEFINITE OPPORTUNITY TO LINK PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO A MORE EFFECTIVE COLLEGE-WIDE PHILOSOPHY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF COLLEGE FUTURE LEADERS

7. NEITHER MIS NOR LEARNER SERVICES LEADERS FEEL THAT THEIR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT HAS BEEN ORGANISED WITH SUCCESSION PLANNING IN MIND.

CASE STUDY 2

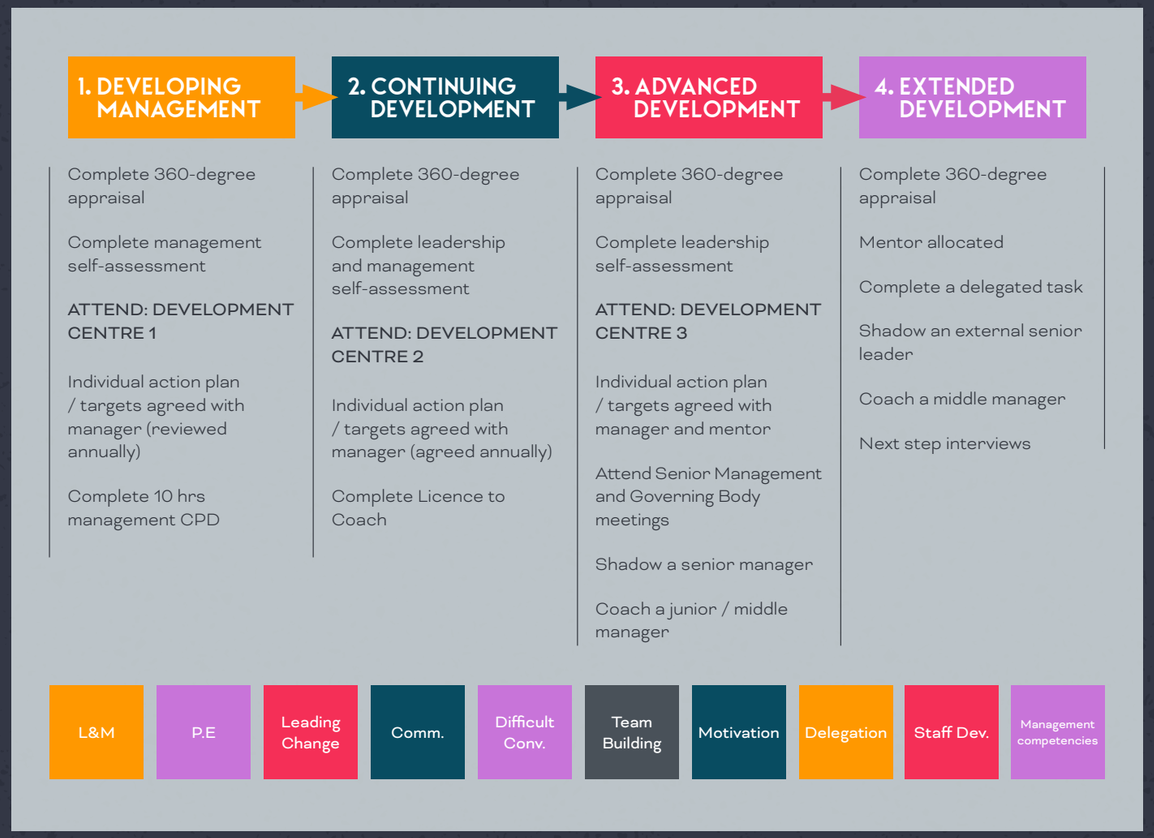
LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT AT CHICHESTER COLLEGE GROUP

THE COLLEGE GROUP

Chichester College Group (CCG) has seen recent rapid growth. With this growth has come the merger of management teams across the group, all with differing experience. CCG has a Group Leadership Team made up of the college Principals, CEO, CFO, and Managing Director for Commercial all of which have been through the college's in-house learning and development programme. Through the leadership and management development programme CCG are supporting empowerment at all levels of the organisation, giving opportunities to grow, develop and take risks.

APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

Chichester College Group offers a comprehensive leadership and management development programme. This programme is available for all staff whether they are aspiring managers, new managers or more experienced senior managers. It is organised into four development pathways to give participants the opportunity to undertake ongoing professional development during their time at CCG. The graphic below outlines the structure of the programme:



'Development Centres' are key features of each pathway and involve 8 participants (or delegates) being observed undertaking a range of activities that are mapped against the leadership and management competencies that CCG has in place. Each delegate is observed throughout the day by a member of the College Management Team who provides a written, developmental report after the event.

There is a theme of coaching running throughout each pathway. Whilst this is embedded throughout the programme, all participants will complete the 'Licence to Coach' and then experience coaching others and being coached as they progress. The culmination of the programme is Development Module 4 where more experienced managers shadow members of CCG's Group Leadership Team before attending 'Next Steps Interviews' which mirror the interview and selection processes for senior leaders

The four development pathways are underpinned by 'The Bridge' which includes ten, one-hour sessions based around key areas of leadership and management. Each participant is asked to reflect after each session and keep a log of key actions that they then take forward with their line manager at the end of 'The Bridge'. The programme is tracked by Professional Development to ensure that CCG is always able to work with staff as they move through the content in each of the pathways.

MENTORING

The content and the structure of the programme are reviewed regularly, and CCG identified that it wanted to encourage and promote participation from staff from diverse job roles across the college group. With staff numbers exceeding 1500, CCG is always aware that there is potentially hidden talent within the organisation who may need more information about what is available to them. With this in mind, CCG launched a mentoring programme where every member of the College Management Team has made themselves available for one hour per month to provide mentoring where required. The offer for staff is that they can access mentoring for one hour per month up to a maximum of twelve months to explore any areas of interest that they may have in relation to leadership and management and their future development. CCG will then be looking to offer them a progression route onto the main programme.

Theme 4

ROLE EXPECTATIONS

The fourth theme, 'role expectations' was designed to allow us to refocus on the overarching purpose of this research, which is to develop an evidence base that generates a clear understanding of the professional life of a middle leader in the English college. It has been undertaken with a view to establishing what the system and policies that are shaping the sector could offer in order to support, develop and reward effective leadership at this key college leadership level.

The middle leader's 'role expectations' in terms of three sub-themes of people, resources and development were explored via the research survey and the follow-up interviews. The data regarding role expectations was designed to offer further insight with the three subsets relating to specific aspects of the middle leadership experience, all of which are considered further in the Recommendations section.

Theme 4 (a)

PEOPLE LEADERSHIP

The 'people' aspect of any leadership role is clearly an important one, and for middle leaders in particular it can generate a range of challenges on a daily basis. Therefore, it was important to explore a cross-section of questions via the survey and the interviews to:

- Learn more about middle leaders' experiences, challenges and level of preparedness in relation to people management
- Help inform how best to support them in the future

The data as a whole provided us with the opportunity to reflect on leadership effectiveness, satisfaction levels as a people leader and manager, and also to tell us something about development needs that might be required (and valued) by middle leaders in the longer term.

The data served to confirm that 93% of all middle leaders felt an enhanced responsibility for their team members in the last year. 85% felt that they were playing a key role in the recruitment of staff to the team that they lead. These were important findings that link well to findings shared in Themes 1 & 2 regarding the attraction of middle leaders and what sustains them in their roles. **Figure 6** opposite highlights the survey data for all respondents.

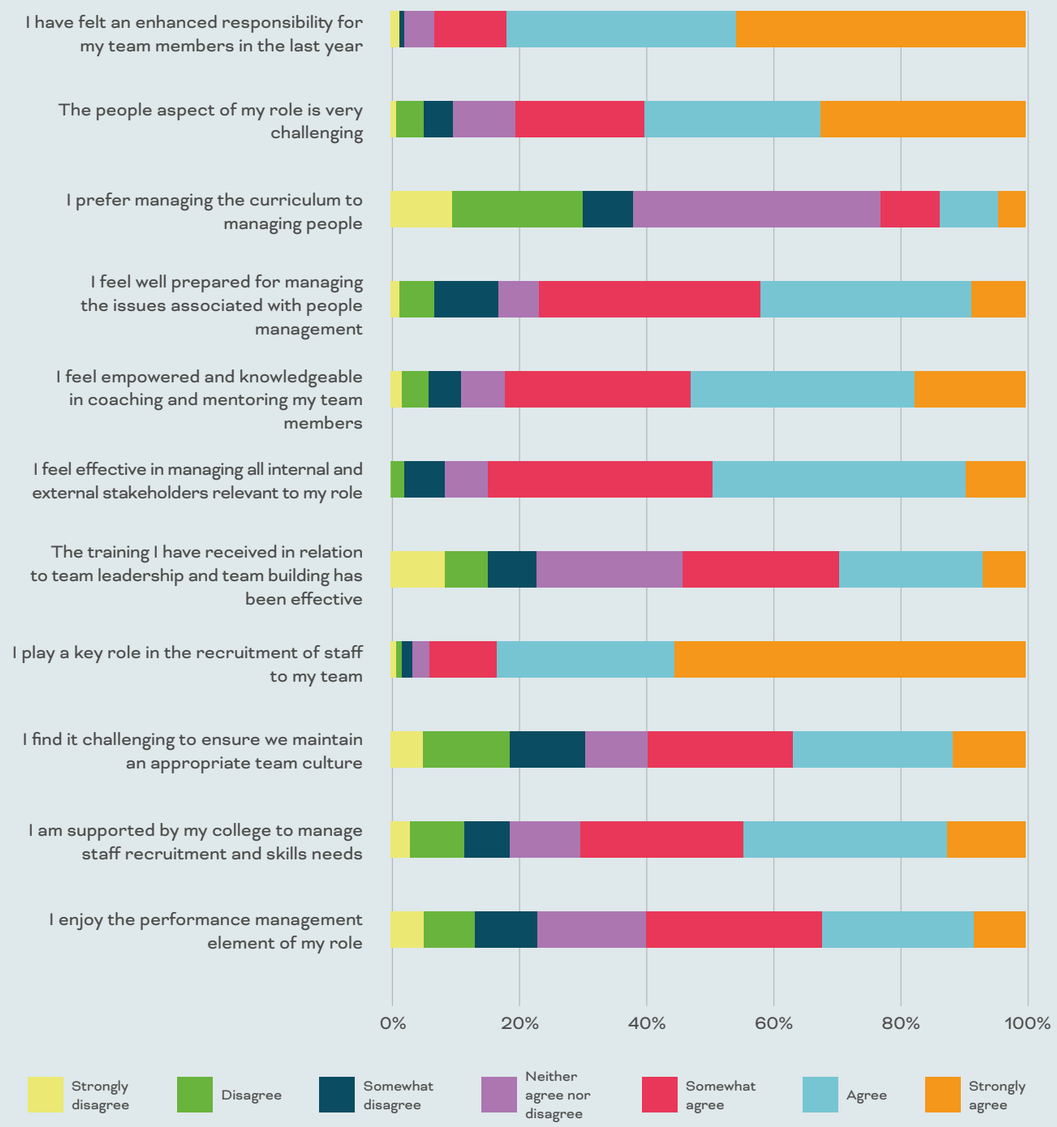
93%

of all middle leaders felt an enhanced responsibility for their team members in the last year

85%

felt that they were playing a key role in the recruitment of staff to the team that they lead

FIGURE 6. Role expectations: People



80%

of survey respondents noted that the people aspects of their role are in reality very challenging

However, even given this initially positive aspect of the data, 80% of survey respondents noted that the people aspects of their role are in reality very challenging. Given that overall they felt well prepared for managing their line management responsibilities, the data suggests a significant difference between the planning and execution of key aspects of people leadership overall and in particular this applies to Curriculum leaders, of whom 84% considered the people aspect of leadership challenging.

Viewing leadership in relation to maintaining an effective team culture and effective people leadership was also worthy of further analysis. Of the 10 questions posed in this section, maintaining an appropriate team culture scored the lowest overall with 59% viewing it as challenging, and the Learner Services leaders (64%) finding it the most challenging.

The importance of middle leader training in team leadership and team building stands out as a factor that may need to be considered further by the sector. Only 6.8% strongly agreed that training had been helpful in relation to these key duties. With 36% of MIS team leaders and 23% of curriculum leaders stating that they were not happy with the training they received to help them, then the evidence that this is an issue becomes clearer.

The relationship between people leadership, curriculum leadership and performance management is also worthy of highlighting here. 80% of all middle leaders find the people aspect of their role very challenging and 23% do not enjoy the performance management aspect of their role. However, on balance middle leaders marginally prefer people leadership over curriculum leadership which suggests that although people leadership is challenging the majority, overall the performance management element is enjoyable for 59% of middle leaders.

For me that was very difficult. I inherited a very unhealthy toxic team and I had two teams I led. Both of them had quite high levels of toxicity in the relationships and the interpersonal relationships were really quite unhealthy. For me it was about modelling the values of the college and what we were trying to do and walking it through them and demonstrating it and living and breathing it.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

As a middle manager you're faced with the choice of either I get in and I help them, and I help do these things or I sit back, and I watch the team fail and experience a lot of stress.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

For me good people leadership is about two things really. First of all, it's about values and shared values, it underpins everything. We might not necessarily always agree on the details of the journey towards a goal, but we have similar values.

CURRICULUM TEAM LEADER

We were a community before the merger, we are a community within a bigger community now. We have a WhatsApp group we go out for do Christmas meals. We do birthdays, everyone always gets a birthday card signed by as many people as we get hold of and it really helps and that's how we make it work. I'm very careful about who I employ, who comes in and joins the team because I don't want to disrupt that harmony - but sometimes you need someone to come in from a different place for new ideas, to freshen up what's happening.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

I've got three distinct teams that I work with, and they understand what my expectations are and I treat them as adults and they are all part of the decision making process, and I think they appreciate that, and I think that's how I like to work with teams.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

My primary focus since I have been here (2.5 years) has been to get the team to a better place and now I feel we are getting there. Previously nobody will come in our office who didn't work there. There seem to have in this culture where people just wouldn't come and bother us, but now you know we very much have an open door. And yes, some people still won't come in, but more people do. It's always the same people, but at least people now feel that they can come in the office and they can come and ask us questions.

MIS TEAM LEADER

I'm trying to allow my staff to feel safe by taking some admin away from them by reassuring them that there are systems in place which let them focus on teaching which let them focus on their students without worrying. I will check that for them I will oversee all of those things and I will take the responsibility for it all.

CURRICULUM TEAM LEADER

KEY POINTS

1. TEAM LEADERS PLAY A KEY ROLE IN THE RECRUITMENT OF STAFF TO THEIR TEAM
2. THERE IS A HIGH DEGREE OF A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR TEAM MEMBERS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC
3. PEOPLE LEADERSHIP IS CHALLENGING BUT BEING WELL PREPARED FOR THIS ASPECT OF THE ROLE IS HELPING TEAM LEADERS
4. THERE IS A STRONG SENSE OF FEELING EFFECTIVE WHEN ENGAGING WITH ALL TYPES OF STAKEHOLDER
5. THE TRAINING RECEIVED IN RELATION TO TEAM LEADERSHIP/TEAM BUILDING, WHILST EFFECTIVE, COULD BE IMPROVED UPON
6. MAINTAINING AN APPROPRIATE TEAM CULTURE IN THE CURRENT CLIMATE IS PROVING CHALLENGING FOR MIDDLE LEADERS.

Theme 4 (b):

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Resource management in this context considers three key aspects. First, how well or otherwise team leaders feel that their team as a whole appreciates the value of effective resource management. Secondly, their perception of the level of delegated authority that they enjoy in their in the role and finally, how much influence middle leaders feel that they have in the planning of the resources judged most necessary for their team overall.

There was a high level of agreement that as team leaders, middle leaders articulated their resource needs well and that they were invited to play a key part in the next stage of the process, planning what resources they needed (see **Figure 7** overleaf). They had delegated resource management authority and accepted that they were accountable for effective resource management for their team overall.

"There was a high level of agreement that as team leaders, middle managers articulated their resource needs well and that they were invited to play a key part in the next stage of the process."

To counter this, 54% of survey respondents felt that they did not have enough resources to address the needs and ambitions of their team – and just under 14% strongly disagreed with the statement that they had enough resources for their team. This was the highest negative comment in this section which should be viewed in contrast to how effective the team leaders felt they were in articulating their teams' resource needs. The strong difference in the responses to these two questions indicates concern of a significant challenge that faces team leaders across the job families in this research. **Figure 8** overleaf highlights the survey data for all respondents.

This is a concern that is compounded further for MIS leaders of whom 24% felt that they did not have enough delegated authority and a further 18% said that they were not invited to play a key part in planning what resources they needed. When the data relating

"54% of survey respondents felt that they did not have enough resources to address the needs and ambitions of their team – and just under 14% strongly disagreed with the statement that they had enough resources for their team."

to accountability is included, it was noted that 24% of MIS team leaders did not view being accountable for the resources in their area as an important part of their role, something that could be viewed as a product of their perception of being disconnected from the process at a strategic level in the first instance. This may in effect be a product of how their job role is designed as serving internal college needs and having a key reporting function on behalf of the college to the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

There were also some important additional headlines from the data that need to be discussed here. For example, 81% of Curriculum and Learner Services team leaders took resource management as seriously as people management. This is an interesting finding given the high percentage of the time that they spend with their team members and learners compared to MIS team who had a 50/50 mix between resource and people management.

In terms of middle leaders' engagement with both internal and external stakeholders, the overall response was positive. 68% of respondents felt that they were effective in engaging with colleagues who they viewed as stakeholders in relation to their role and in working with key parties whose engagement with the college and their team was important. This reflected well on how they viewed a key feature of partnership working.

FIGURE 7. 'I am invited to play a key role in planning what resources are needed for my team' - responses by job family

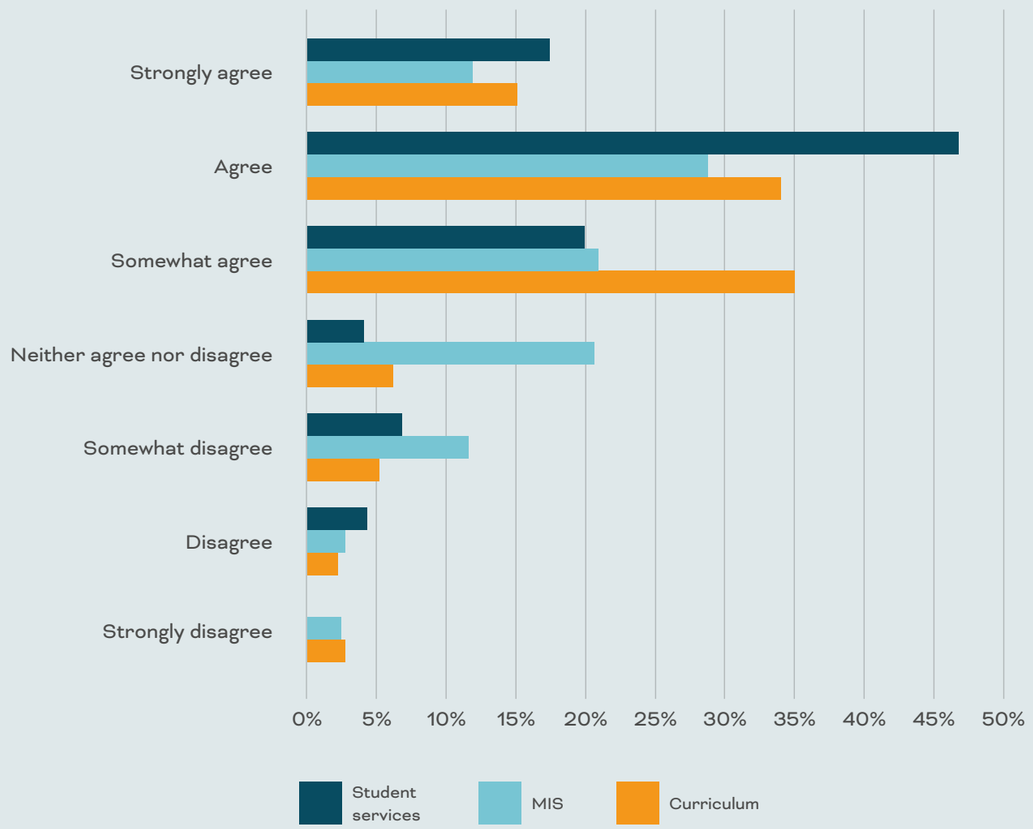
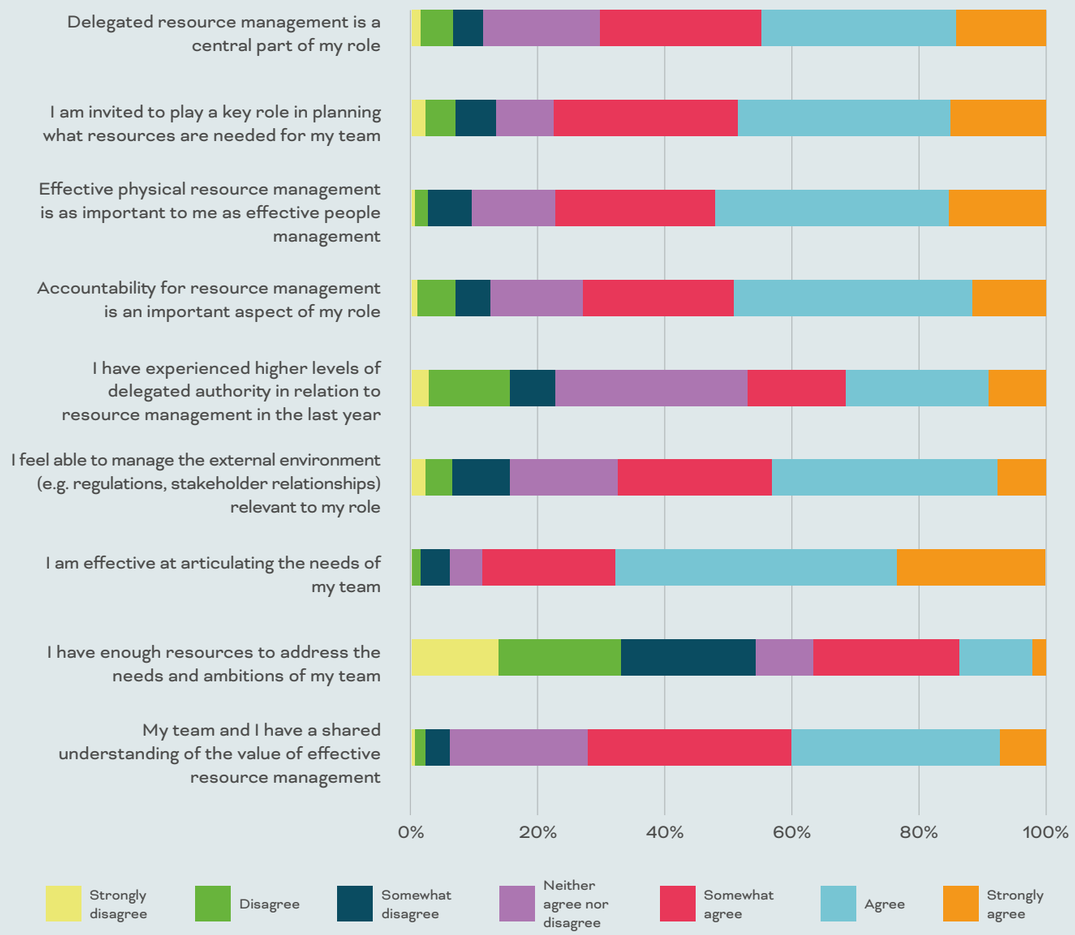


FIGURE 8. Role expectations: Resource management



KEY POINTS

1. TEAM LEADERS ARE EFFECTIVE IN ARTICULATING THE NEEDS OF THEIR TEAM
2. THEY ARE INVITED TO PLAY THEIR PART IN PLANNING THE RESOURCE NEEDS OF THEIR TEAM
3. PHYSICAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND PEOPLE MANAGEMENT ARE FOCUSED UPON EQUALLY WELL
4. OVERALL TEAMS HAVE A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
5. COMPARED TO THE OTHER TEAM LEADERS, MIS TEAM LEADERS APPEAR SLIGHTLY MARGINALISED IN RELATION TO KEY ASPECTS OF THE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PROCESS
6. IT IS QUESTIONABLE WHETHER THE NEEDS, AMBITIONS AND RESOURCE ALLOCATIONS OF COLLEGE MIDDLE LEADERS ARE BEING SUITABLY ADDRESSED.

Theme 4 (c):

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

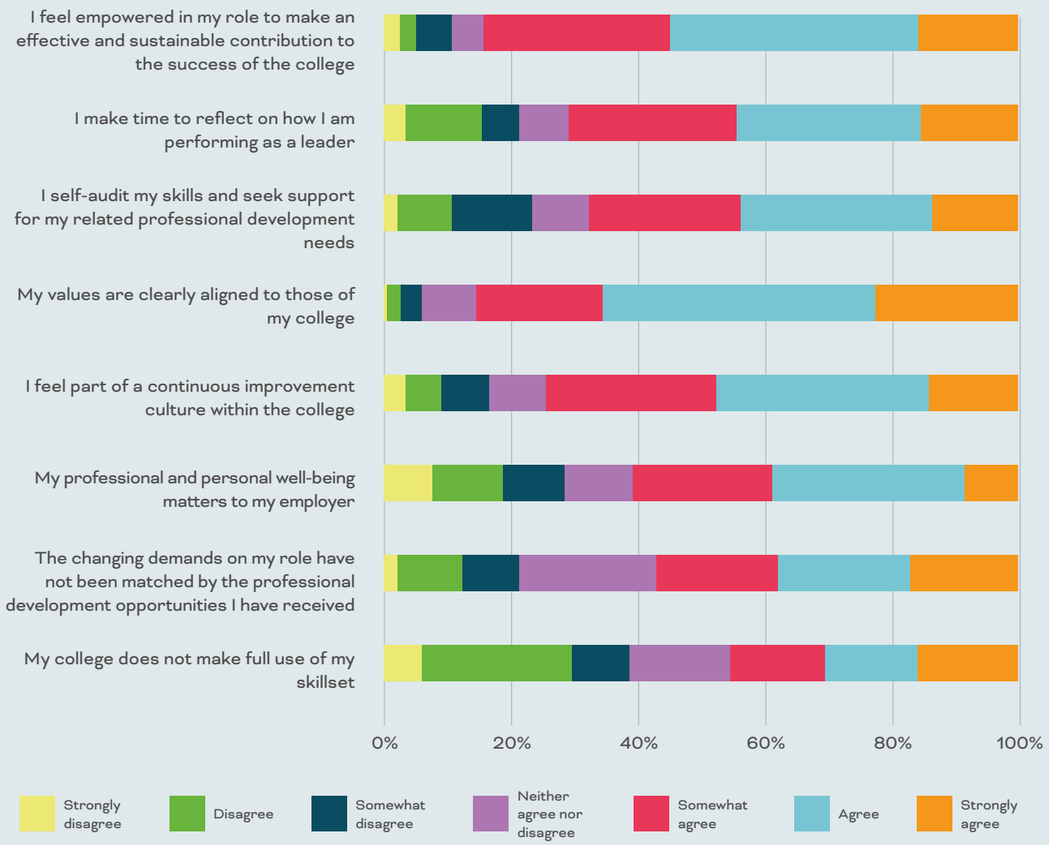
In this sub theme the focus is upon how the middle leader feels aligned to the values of the college and college culture. From this basis the data allowed us to consider to what extent middle leaders felt empowered and supported as individuals, to then evaluate how this is translated into their professional development needs so that they can work dynamically and effectively.

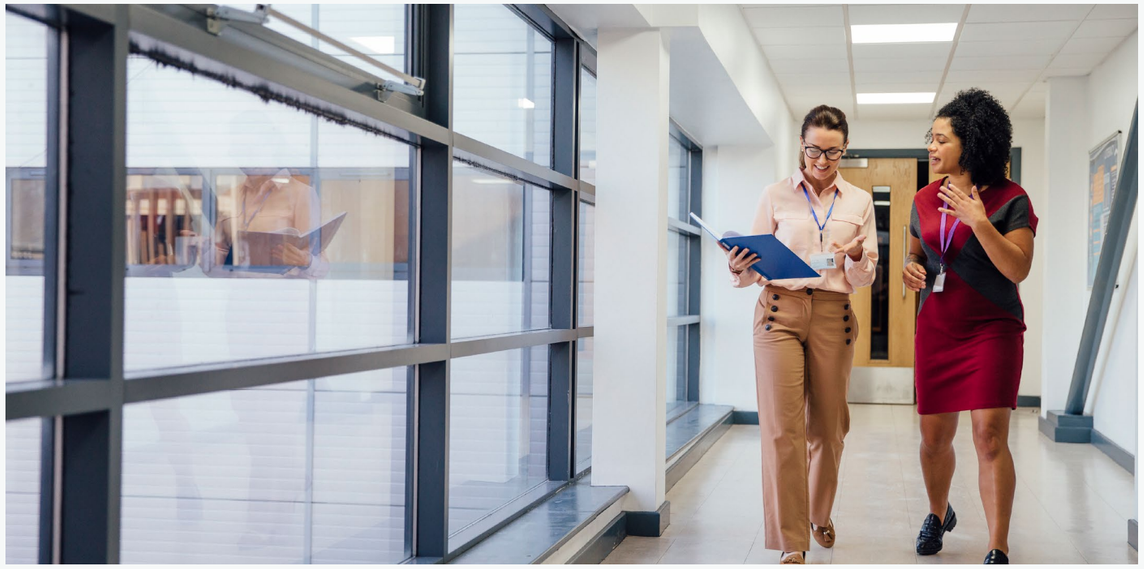
What was clear overall is that middle leaders (85%) feel that their values are closely aligned to those of their college. From a corporate perspective this data is highly encouraging and represents a solid basis for organisational success and the professional development of the middle tier. Similarly, a very positive message emerges in relation to whether middle managers felt that they were part of a continuous improvement culture in their colleges. 75% felt that they were a part, and when both values and continuous improvement are linked to a strong sense of empowerment (85%), then the broad view is that the professional development of middle leaders is being considered, addressed and reviewed from a very solid foundation. This view is made even more powerful because all role families came across as professionals who took time to reflect on how they were performing as a leader (70%) as well as working effectively to self-audit their professional development skills needs (68%). **Figure 9** overleaf highlights the survey data for all respondents.

"Middle leaders (85%) feel that their values are closely aligned to those of their college"

"All role families came across as professionals who took time to reflect on how they were performing as a leader (70%) as well as working effectively to self-audit their professional development skills needs (68%)."

FIGURE 9. Role expectations: Development





Values alignment is consistently high across all three job families and in parallel they also feel empowered in relatively equal measure, with Curriculum leaders feeling marginally less empowered than MIS and Learner Services middle leaders. In terms of middle leaders believing that their professional and personal well-being mattered to their employer, just over 60% felt that this was the case – a broadly positive outcome, but one nonetheless that college leaders may wish to look into further given that 31% of Curriculum leaders felt that this was an issue for them.

Given that the sector is experiencing a high degree of turbulence, that demands on leaders at all levels have grown significantly and that new operational challenges are emerging – for example in cyber security - it was also interesting to find in the survey that 57% of all middle leaders felt that their professional development opportunities had not kept pace with the rate of change. It was a view shared equally by all role family middle leaders. To a degree these findings need to be considered alongside the data overall that noted 44% of middle leaders felt that their college was not making enough use of their skillset and for MIS middle leaders it was 48%.

57%

of all middle leaders felt that their professional development opportunities had not kept pace with the rate of change

I feel empowered to make decisions which impact on my team. As the old saying goes, 'Sometimes it's better to ask for forgiveness than ask for permission'. I think it's a good saying. I am trusted to make decisions and to work collaboratively with other team leaders.

MIS TEAM LEADER

I do feel empowered - and I am really nosy. I do take an interest in what other leaders in the college are doing, how they do things in their curriculum area and why.

CURRICULUM LEADER TEAM LEADER

My middle leadership experience here is really preparing me well for promotion. I'm know that I am valued here. I'm ambitious and I can do more and better.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

I think the most effective learning I have experienced has been from senior colleagues, I am in their debt. I'm taking bits of learning from a range of leaders.

MIS TEAM LEADER

I've had a lot of challenging experiences as a middle leader, but ones that I've learned an awful lot from, and I've learned a lot about myself and whether or not I've got the resilience to become a senior leader in a college.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

(Senior management) have this vision of what they want and then that's fine, because I can work with that. Obviously we generally work together, but sometimes it does feel like they don't know enough about the intricacies of how long everything takes, how complicated it is. So, yes, sometimes I don't feel important.

MIS TEAM LEADER

I am empowered to make decisions but with some challenging decisions about students I tend to have a quick meeting (on Zoom) with my line manager or my equivalent from another campus to get their point of view I still make the decisions but I value their input.

LEARNER SERVICES TEAM LEADER

I'm given a lot of scope in my role and that's really good because it gives me that flexibility for trial and error, which I think is really important. In this day and age we have to try things and see if they work and without doing that we won't make progress.

CURRICULUM LEADER TEAM LEADER

For me it is about knowing your staff and knowing what makes them come to work and about knowing what is important to them and what their values are. People need to buy into the same values and purpose for being here. If I know what motivates people, what makes people tick I can then see how their values match with what I am trying to do.

CURRICULUM LEADER TEAM LEADER

I think that the culture at this college definitely is not about holding people back. It's about if you've got a skill set which obviously somebody notices then you will get a role that will help you enhance it.

CURRICULUM LEADER TEAM LEADER

KEY POINTS

1. MIDDLE LEADERS HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF VALUES ALIGNMENT WITH THEIR COLLEGE
2. BEING PART OF A CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT CULTURE LIES AT THE HEART OF THE MIDDLE LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE
3. THE PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL WELL-BEING OF MIDDLE LEADERS MATTERS TO COLLEGE LEADERS
4. MAKING TIME TO REFLECT ON HOW THEY ARE PERFORMING AS A LEADER MATTERS TO MIDDLE LEADERS
5. THE SELF-AUDITING OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS AND THEN SEEKING SUPPORT TO ADDRESS THESE NEEDS IS A STRONG CHARACTERISTIC OF COLLEGE MIDDLE LEADERS
6. MATCHING THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF MIDDLE LEADERS TO THE CHANGING NEEDS WITHIN THEIR ROLES IS A GROWING CONCERN AND CHALLENGE FOR THE FE SECTOR AS A WHOLE
7. ENSURING THAT THE FULL RANGE OF SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCE OF MIDDLE LEADERS ARE USED BY COLLEGES IS BOTH A CHALLENGE AND AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL COLLEGES.

5 SUMMARY ANALYSIS

We have concluded that in spite of a range of challenges that middle leaders rise to address on a daily basis, their roles and associated responsibilities remain attractive to the vast majority of postholders. Middle leaders are clearly aligned with the values of their college, are committed to their teams and to their teams' development and work hard to balance people leadership and resource management. This was clearly a good basis from which the sector can seek to address the leadership development needs of its middle leaders.

"Middle leaders are clearly aligned with the values of their college, are committed to their teams and to their teams' development and work hard to balance people leadership and resource management."

However, we also concluded that the complexity of middle leaders' professional lives, the rate of change in the sector as a whole and the range and volume of demands are all impacting on their work/life balance in a negative manner. Overall, this means that middle leader roles risk becoming increasingly operational; that they are in many instances living in the here and now; are failing in some cases to engage at a strategic level; and that they do not have the time necessary to focus on their professional development needs either at all or effectively. This raises questions relating to organisational structure, role clarity and the number of middle leaders that a college either chooses to employ or can afford to employ – all of which we concluded is worthy of further reflection at both policy and individual college level.

AUTONOMY AT THE MIDDLE TIER

Given that these broad-based initial conclusions confirmed that middle leaders found their roles intrinsically rewarding, it was important to evaluate what was currently sustaining their interest and commitment in the medium to longer term. What stood out from the data is that senior leaders are playing a key role in helping to sustain the commitment of their middle leaders and they do this by being accessible, supportive and by delegating an appropriate degree of authority to them. Whether increased levels of delegation were of a direct result of new ways of working during the pandemic was not clear, but the sense of effective, shared leadership and associated levels of trust in the middle tier was evident and was helping to generate trust and mutual respect both from above and below.

However, this conclusion is not uniform across all the role families. We noted that Curriculum leaders were being afforded much more autonomy than either Learner Services or MIS team leaders. To have significantly differing levels of job satisfaction between these role families - as reflected in comments relating to the rate of change and level of reward - highlights a disparity that we have concluded has the potential to lead to feelings of isolation. This in turn may lead to reduced levels of effective teamwork, reinforce silo working, reduce interest levels in key roles and in due course may impact upon staff turnover in parts of the middle tier.

ADDRESSING DEVELOPMENT NEEDS, MENTORING & COACHING

It would be easy to assume that the leadership development of the middle tier is organised in a rational, progressive manner designed around balancing organisational and individual needs, and that such development is initiated in a formal manner via (for example) some form of performance appraisal process. However, we have concluded that whilst professional relationships and support between the senior and middle tier are very good overall, and that the middle tier consciously looks for its professional development needs to be addressed, currently there is not a consistently high-quality response in place to address these needs.

There is also a disparity between middle leaders who seek professional development opportunities and the actual response to their needs, although when their needs are addressed the benefits are perceived as significant and are valued. Overall though there is a lack of a clear philosophy in relation to the development of future leaders with succession planning in mind. This leads us to conclude that colleges would benefit from taking a consistently strategic view of the professional development needs of its middle tier as a group, but more importantly as individuals. We are confident that this is achievable because of the existing sound professional relationships between the senior and middle tiers in colleges, and because of the existing level of trust between them.

"Whilst professional relationships and support between the senior and middle tier are very good overall, and that the middle tier consciously looks for its professional development needs to be addressed, currently there is not a consistently high-quality response in place to address these needs."

Similarly, there is a confused picture relating to the mentoring and coaching of the middle tier. However, where either or both are provided then the perception of their value to individuals is wholly positive, and it also reflects well on the colleges concerned. However, inconsistency sector- wide and/or within colleges has led us to conclude that opportunities are being missed. For example, there are benefits that senior leaders can take from acting as a coach and/or mentor to a middle leader in their own college, or to middle leaders in another college, in addition to the added value of undertaking such roles for middle leaders as part of a leadership development programme.

"Middle leader professional experience is also shaped by the level of engagement they experience in the change and development processes within their college."

Taken together this has led in some cases to a fragmented, self-initiated approach to professional development which, amongst other things can and has generated a desire to move elsewhere for support, recognition, and/or career enhancement purposes. Our view is that staff turnover at the middle tier has the potential to be reduced and this can be achieved through considered professional development interventions that are addressed in partnership with their college.

As such the confidence, knowledge and skills enhancement that a middle leader experiences through high quality professional development are a critical part of their relationship with their employer. In addition, if we link these factors to the stated high level of values alignment and mutual trust, then the perceived risks associated with increased levels of delegated authority are minimised and leadership effectiveness has even more of an opportunity to be enhanced at the team level.

EVOLVING JOB EXPECTATIONS & COVID-19

Role expectations for any member of staff can and do differ over time based on how their professional experience is evolving. This includes the rate of change that they are experiencing, the potential growing complexity of their roles, the support they feel they are receiving from line managers and overall, how they perceive that their role is changing or developing compared to initial expectations. Their experience is shaped by events both within and outside the college environment college and by the manner in which education policy is being interpreted and applied by their college. Middle leader professional experience is also shaped by the level of engagement they experience in the change and development processes within their college, and in recent times by the pressures that have been generated by COVID-19 as it impacted upon their working lives, those they lead and the students they serve.

Given this last factor it was inevitable that through the interview phase of the research interviewees would refer to aspects of the pandemic that had impacted upon them directly as team leaders. The conclusions we reached overall were that workload had increased for all middle leaders and that 'working differently', namely remotely or in some form of 'blended' manner, had generated a host of challenges.

For some middle leaders the crisis became an opportunity to be much more entrepreneurial than they might have otherwise been, and some curriculum and Learner Services team leaders grasped the opportunity to reach out to external agencies. They were successful in increasing provision and services for and within the community. They also generated creative solutions within their team to improve and sustain new levels of access and support in key areas of the college, even when working from home.

What has been achieved through such dynamic responses to the crisis has served to enhance the reputation of our colleges in the wider community, shaped the manner in which support and training is provided, and increased the reach, relevance and impact of colleges for the longer term. In short, it has generated considered reflection on the very purpose of the sector as a force for good.

However, the pressure and expectations that have emerged for middle leaders in Learner Services in particular over the last year has proved to be a major challenge for middle leaders. Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns and restrictions required Learner Services teams to respond dynamically and purposefully. We have concluded that they quickly established that they did not necessarily have the staffing resources to draw upon at a time of unprecedented demand for their services and this impacted on their work/life balance and stress levels in some instances. Yet they remained dedicated to their team and rose to address the growing range of challenges that they acknowledged were critical. In doing so, they made an outstanding contribution to the community of learners that needed them. Learner Services teams increased the level of provision of parental engagement, expanded the already high levels of multi-agency partnership working and sought to address unprecedented levels of learner welfare needs and related safeguarding issues that grew exponentially during lockdown.

This response from Learner Services team leaders during the pandemic has quite rightly been acknowledged in our colleges but the impact upon them is still being assessed. This has led us to conclude that the centrality, leadership and resourcing of all that we label 'Learner Services' is now in need of being re-evaluated in order that colleges can establish how best to sustain Learner Services' enhanced contribution to the community overall.

LEADERS & THEIR TEAMS

In focusing upon role expectations, we concluded that strong values alignment, feeling part of a continuous development culture along with a strong sense of empowerment were sustaining middle leaders in their roles. Further, that over the last year middle leaders felt an enhanced responsibility for the members of their team, on behalf of whom they were effective in articulating their needs.

Whilst all of this is very encouraging, we concluded that key aspects of the middle leadership role remain very challenging. For example, the stated desire to maintain a positive team culture within teams whilst struggling at times to feel that professional development needs are being addressed satisfactorily. We feel that the challenge middle leaders are experiencing is exacerbated by the lack of consistent training to support effective team leadership and team building. This disconnection has created a degree of discomfort within the middle tier and in some instances, it has undermined their belief in the relevance of their role and their contribution towards delivering on college and team goals. There is therefore evidence of this leading to tensions within their team, particularly when they see themselves as champions of their team and where they feel that their area of responsibility is under-resourced.

Such conclusions should be considered alongside our findings that the people aspect of the middle leadership role is viewed as problematic where it relates to team leadership. Taken as a whole, we consider that this can and has led to some middle leaders feeling isolated and undervalued. Over time this has the potential to impact on the desire of some middle leaders to remain in post or at best it may lead them to focus on the operational rather than the developmental aspects of their role, potentially placing them in direct conflict with line manager expectations of them.

"The people aspect of the middle leadership role is viewed as problematic where it relates to team leadership. Taken as a whole, we consider that this can and has led to some middle leaders feeling isolated and undervalued."

TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT BEST PRACTICE

The overarching organisational challenge of ensuring that middle leaders obtain an appropriate level of professional development to increase their awareness, knowledge, understanding and confidence as leaders was considered in detail. It is not surprising that we have concluded there is no one single uniform model of professional development that is serving the sector's needs, and that this is not viewed as problematic because where development needs are formally acknowledged and addressed this works well for both parties. Effective professional development programmes are being provided internally for the middle tier as a whole as well as being self-initiated and funded/part funded by colleges and delivered externally in a variety of modes. Provision is both accredited and non-accredited and there is no real concern about such programmes being unaccredited.

However, we concluded that for some middle leaders, engagement with in-house training should ideally be acknowledged by accrediting bodies upon request, but we accept that this is a perennial issue associated with most internally developed leadership programmes in this sector and more widely.

Linked to all aspects of the professional development of the middle tier is the contribution and the benefits associated with effective coaching and mentoring, irrespective of whether either or both are provided internally or via an external body/individual. The evidence has led us to conclude that where a middle leader has access to both professional development and/or a coach/mentor then the benefits to the individual and the college overall are considerable. Further, where such a service exists then the changing demands that are being made of middle leaders have the potential of being both discussed and addressed via the influence and authority of – ideally - a trained in-house senior member of staff. This person can comfortably act as a conduit for their respective middle leader, facilitate the professional development that is agreed between them and then work to ensure that the college makes full use of the enhanced skill set of the middle tier as a whole.

Finally, where the development needs of middle leaders are ignored and/or overlooked this can be for a variety of reasons, including time pressures upon senior leaders, but this is clearly not an ideal situation for middle leaders. We concluded that Curriculum team leaders are the primary beneficiaries of leadership development opportunities and that MIS team leaders in particular feel that they are viewed as specialist service providers within their college.

Where the data suggests that middle leaders both reflect upon and self-audit their professional development needs, but where they are not then addressed in a structured manner by their college, this has the very real potential of marginalising key sections of staff, disadvantaging them as a group and also individually. This leads to the conclusion that the professional development needs of the middle tier are not being considered strategically at the corporate level in our colleges, and that differential access to opportunity across the middle tier is problematic at the very least.

6 CONCLUSION

It was abundantly clear through this research that those who were initially attracted to undertake middle tier positions in our colleges are, as key postholders today, consistently rising to address the management and leadership duties, responsibilities and challenges that they have faced and continue to face on a daily basis. They are sustained in part because of the close alignment they have with the values of their college and its broad direction, and they are broadly comfortable with the professional relationships they have with their line managers. They are dedicated to their team but above all, to the learners they are committed to serve.

"To maintain and even improve upon the impactful nature of their contribution requires a more considered, reflective and systemised assessment and response to their professional development."

They benefit considerably when and where:

- They feel trusted
- They feel that they are part of a larger team
- Senior leaders consistently practice shared leadership

Their creative approaches to team leadership, business development, visible improvements to serviced provision, learner outcomes, services and systems serve to evidence how the role of the middle leaders is evolving in a wholly positive manner.

However, to maintain and even improve upon the impactful nature of their contribution requires a more considered, reflective and systemised assessment and response to their professional development, in particular to their leadership development needs. To do so would serve to increase middle leaders' knowledge and understanding of leadership at the team level and beyond, widen their appreciation of leadership practice across the sector and generate within them the confidence to lead and manage change effectively. To link such a response to the provision of mentoring and coaching of each individual middle leader, as noted above, could generate a parallel set of benefits for all parties.

In undertaking this work we have seen some important features evidenced of how our middle leaders are adapting, contributing and being increasingly impactful at the team level. It has been a privilege to play a small part in shining a light on these hidden heroes in our colleges. However, we have concluded that it is very easy for our middle tier to become isolated, feel undervalued, overburdened and potentially marginalised. This can and does happen in part as a product of college leaders having more significant priorities due to the rate of change and wider pressures that they are experiencing and addressing. This has in some instances led to middle leaders finding themselves reactive to challenges, becoming predominantly operational and in need of clearer appreciation from their line managers of the pressures they are facing, and we suggest, of their longer-term professional development needs.

We have before us a watershed opportunity within the new normal of college leadership to do something more than acknowledge the contribution of our middle leaders. We offer no panacea in relation to the findings and conclusions presented here but we have concluded that where recognition, reward and the professional development of the middle tier are addressed sequentially and consistently then it is the sector, our individual colleges as well as our middle leaders who all benefit in the long term. It is this perspective that is reflected in our recommendations.

"We have before us a watershed opportunity within the new normal of college leadership to do something more than acknowledge the contribution of our middle leaders."

"It has been a privilege to play a small part in shining a light on these hidden heroes in our colleges."

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

In this research we sought to learn what the system should do to foster a notion of creative excellence in the manner in which it supports, develops and rewards effective leadership in the middle tier in our colleges. The subjective experience, insights and narratives of middle leaders, the contribution of sector experts through a series of interviews and interview data from 235 participants have all served to shape our conclusions and informed the following 12 recommendations, grouped into 3 themes.

INVESTING IN MIDDLE LEADERS

1.

That policy-makers and the college sector work to establish a leadership qualification framework for the middle tier with progression in mind. Whilst accreditation is not critical, it would be valuable for the sector to work with selected partner organisations to ensure that cost-effective accreditation can be provided for such programmes, with a view to progression to additional qualifications if they are needed in future.

2.

That formalised mentoring and coaching forms part of this framework and that senior staff in all colleges are formally trained to undertake such roles both within their own college and/or for middle leaders in other colleges. Colleges should consider mentoring/coaching in partnership with other colleges in order for middle leaders to develop professional relationships external to their current environment.

3.

That middle leadership networks should be strongly encouraged and that networking activities with organisations such as the AoC are formalised in order that best practice can be observed and shared. This will enable middle leaders to engage professionally with peers across the sector and they can work effectively in parallel to the professional development we are recommending for them.

ADDRESSING THE DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF MIDDLE LEADERS

4.

That the leadership development needs of all middle leaders are formally evaluated and addressed and then reviewed as part of the annual appraisal process. Such an inclusive approach will go a long way to ensuring equality of opportunity and will serve to reinforce the value that college places in all of its middle leaders.

5.

That equal focus should be given to the strategic and operational elements of middle leadership. College leaders should monitor the balance of duties and responsibilities that their middle leaders undertake. This is in order that middle leaders can be engaged in influencing and leading change across the college and specifically within their team as a priority.

6.

That colleges should ensure that as part of the professional development of all middle leaders they effectively communicate that leadership for succession planning is a key objective and an organisational priority.

7.

That the leadership development of the middle tier in our colleges should be designed with appropriate reference to priorities of the Ofsted (2021) Education inspection framework. Through shared values, trust and delegated authority the middle tier can build and sustain effective teams and ensure the delivery of high-quality, inclusive education and training to all.

8.

That at a senior level within our colleges an increasing level of attention is given to delegating leadership to the middle tier along with the resources and authority to ensure that they can support and develop their teams and through them improve services to our learners. This both recognises the important contribution that the middle tier makes and encourages strategic behaviours and engagement in change processes.

9.

That all middle leaders are supported to engage with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders in order to enhance their appreciation of changing needs in the wider community and to gain a deeper appreciation of the contribution and needs of 'the internal customer'.

RECOGNISING MIDDLE LEADERS

10.

That an evaluation of workload, range of duties and expectations as well conditions of service for all middle leaders is undertaken in order to ensure equality across the college and to address any current or emerging concerns relating to well-being and excessive staff turnover.

11.

That particular focus is given to the support, inclusion and development of MIS team leaders as specialists and as team leaders given the key contribution the MIS team plays in relation to the effective running of our colleges. They need to feel consciously that they are a key part of the college and have the opportunity to engage with a cross section of colleagues. They also need to know that their role and contribution is understood and be fully supported professionally by senior staff in terms of skills development and resource allocation.

12.

That the complexity of the services and contribution made by the section of our colleges we have called 'Learner Services' in our research and the pressure on the middle leaders who manage these services, is fully acknowledged in our colleges. Significant funding and skills gaps as well as staff shortages/turnover have led us to recommend that the middle leader in this part of our colleges is 'at risk'. We recommend that the career path, training and terms and conditions of all aspiring and established middle leaders in 'Learner Services' are reviewed in the near future, particularly as the demands for Learner Services and support continue to grow.

APPENDIX 1

SUMMARY OF A CROSS SECTION OF AVAILABLE LEADERSHIP PROGRAMMES

Advance HE: New to leading and Leading Departments (2 programmes) *https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/*

Association of Colleges: Entry to Management and Excelling as a College Manager (2 programmes) *https://www.aoc.co.uk/funding-and-corporate-services/aoc-create-training-and-development/leadership-programmes*

College Development Network: Emerging Leadership Programme and Coaching for the Future *https://www.cdn.ac.uk/management-and-leadership-programmes/*

Department for Education: National Professional Qualification for Middle Leadership (NPQML) *https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-professional-qualification-for-middle-leadership-npqml*

Education and Training Foundation: Leading from the Middle *https://leadershiphub.etfoundation.co.uk/courses/middle-managers-programme*

Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL): *Broad based guidance and events*

ILM: *Level 3 Leadership and Management*

Land based Colleges & Universities Aspiring to Excellence (Landex) *http://www.landex.org.uk/*

(*Middle Manager and/or Leader Development Programme*)

London Business School: Leading Teams for Emerging Leaders *https://www.london.edu/executive-education/leadership/leading-teams-for-emerging-leaders*

National Professional Qualifications -*NPQSL School model based programmes*

Postsecondary International Network: An International Alliance of Postsecondary Polytechnic and Community-Technical Institutions – Provides conferences, and webinars on leadership development *https://pinnetwork.org/*

University College London: Developing Middle Leaders (Level 2): Leadership Development Programme (for Experienced Middle Leaders in Education) *https://www.ucl.ac.uk/short-courses/search-courses/developing-middle-leaders-level-2-leadership-development-programme-experienced-middle*

University of Warwick: Team Leader and Supervisor Development *https://warwick.ac.uk/services/od/lead-man-dev/programmes/*

University of Sussex CMI Level 7 Strategic Management & Leadership Practice *https://sussexbusinessschool.com/management-courses/cmi-level-7-strategic-management-and-leadership/*

APPENDIX 2

QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Interview questions for the 8 Microsoft Teams interviews commencing 8th November 2021

Based on the themes and responses to the survey only the following questions will be used in the Microsoft Teams interviews for the semi structured interviews.

As an 'opener', confirm first what their role is in their college then ask:

1. What is it that you like about your job/role?

2. What are the most challenging aspects of your role?

3. Do you feel empowered to undertake your role and to make decisions?

4. How have you approached establishing a strong team culture?

4a How have you developed your approach to your job role and its interfaces at different levels within the college?

5. How could the college help you in relation to their work/life balance?

6. How are your professional development (leadership) needs identified and addressed?

7. What is the most effective PD experience they have had and why?

8. What is your vision of the ideal PD (leadership development experience)?

9. To what extent is your middle leadership role preparing you for progression in your career?

10. Do you see your career progression at your current college?

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DISCLAIMER

The information contained in this report is correct at the time of publication, March 2022.