Yes, but what happens next? Succession Planning in English Further Education Colleges

Key Words

Succession Planning, Principal, Further Education, Leadership

Abstract

In this article we examine the role of the Principal within Further Education colleges in England and explore the often neglected issue of succession planning in the sector. To provide background and context to the current situation, key policies and developments over the past 30 years are reviewed and challenges identified. Interviews with serving Principals designed to explore the role, what leadership development was in place and whether succession planning was used have been carried out. The findings demonstrate that succession planning within colleges is underdeveloped, something particularly concerning when linked to the fact that the role is often a short term one with the turnover of people at the top of the organisation being a major concern. Whilst in some cases individual organisations took steps to identify and support those who wanted to progress this was limited and impacted by the sector environment. The participants' responses reinforced findings from literature that the importance of succession planning was often paramount to the success of an organisation and included some suggestions as how to increase the pool of potential future leaders for the sector.

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Introduction

The standard definition for the further education sector comes from Jameson and Hillier (2003,2), who describe the sector as 'Educational provision for post-compulsory education age learners at sub-degree level in a range of post-16, adult and extra-mural education and training institutions'. Whilst this definition is certainly adequate in mapping the general landscape, it does not capture the full complexity of the sector as within this broad stratum lie a number of different subsections, the largest of which is General Further Education (GFE) Colleges. These institutions' objective is to provide high-quality technical and professional education and training for young people, adults and employers (AoC 2021) via the delivery of a broad range of qualifications. To provide an idea of the scale of this subsection, in 2021 there were 162 GFE colleges (out of 234 colleges total) in England and the average college works with approximately 600 organisations. Given that the total income amongst colleges in England is around £6.4 billion (AoC 2021) it is easy to see the significance of the sector.

When looking at the statistical picture, it appears that the sector is performing well in terms of the quality of education provided. 81% of colleges were judged to be 'outstanding' or 'good' at their most recent Ofsted inspection, 1.7 million students studied in the sector last year and over 86% passed their course (AoC 2021). However, digging below the surface, there are a wide range of challenges and pressures which impact the sector and the experiences of those working within it. These pressures are not something that is new for the sector, nor can they be attributed to one event, as the sector has undergone 'more or less continuous change over the last three decades' (Norris and Adams 2017, 5), but they are important to note as it provides additional background to the role of the Principal. Hanley and Orr (2019) describe the sector as being characterised by an instability and policy churn that creates challenges when responding to and implementing changes in processes, qualifications and delivery models. Alongside this, there have been ongoing financial pressures on colleges, with the rate of

funding per learner falling in real terms over the past six years (NAO 2020) and this has contributed to a worsening financial situation for many organisations in the sector.

These financial pressures were the subject of a report by the National Audit Office in 2015 that identified action needed to address the problems (NAO 2015). Following this report, a process of area reviews was initiated with the stated aim of ensuring that the sector had the capacity to meet the needs of students and employers, and that organisations were financially stable and delivered high quality provision (HM Government 2015). 33 of these reviews took place between 2015 and 2017 and their impact was shown by the large number of mergers within the sector that followed the conclusion of the process. The result was that institutions became larger and more diverse, in many cases creating college groups that spanned a wider geographic area. These mergers often resulted in internal reorganisations and a restructuring of leadership teams.

Despite the area reviews, many colleges are still facing ongoing financial challenges and there are widespread concerns about levels of financial deficit (DfE 2019). There have been questions regarding the regulatory systems that are in place to measure financial performance (FETL 2020a) and why despite interventions there have been increases in these events. A report on the financial sustainability of colleges (NAO 2020) described the financial health of the sector as 'fragile', suggesting further action still needs to be taken to ensure its long-term stability. The report records that some level of Government intervention was taking place in nearly half of all colleges (NAO 2020).

It is not just the financial challenges that leaders within the sector need to address as part of their role. Policy change, qualification reform and environmental pressures are key amongst a number of challenges facing leaders. Other major factors include the impact of Brexit (Britain's departure from the European Union) on the training needs of workers, as well as the employment status of employees (Warner 2020) and the role FE colleges will play in the

economic recovery post-pandemic (Collab Group Report 2020). These factors create pressure not just on everyone within the college sector as a whole, but specifically on college leaders.

Against this background, the role of the Principal, or indeed any individual in a senior leadership position, has become increasingly open to external scrutiny. O'Leary (2016) discussed this and contrasted the current culture of doing 'more with less' in colleges with the fact that the pay of the senior managers has increased at a rate that is significantly above the rate of inflation as noted in an *FE Week* article on April 26, 2018. . Whilst it is clear that individuals in such positions should be able to account for their actions, the coverage in many of the cases raised in the media has been negative in tone and this has the potential to impact recruitment and affect confidence in the role. Some commentators have been quick to highlight failings in performance thus creating a high stakes, highly stressful environment. These failings may relate to financial performance or failed projects and are often impacted by the highly complex and financially challenging context within the sector. This situation has been explored in a number of Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) publications exploring the concept of shame and shaming in the sector and the impact of this (for example Bazalgette and Harris 2020). Although in the minority, as evidenced by the 82% performing well (AoC 2021), they attract a disproportionate level of publicity.

There has been a move against this shaming of individuals and colleges and concern has been expressed about the impact of these actions. A research project published by FETL (2020b) explored the pressures involved in leadership and the personal cost to individuals caught up in cases where there has been a perceived failure. One of the key recommendations from the research was that more needs to be done to prepare individuals for leadership. There is a need to 'review succession plans and development needs of potential leaders, and adequately support new college leaders as they transition into exposed roles in ways which may not have been done in the past' *(*FETL 2020b, 26). Whilst it is important to stress that this elevation of the

person at the top of the organisation to figurehead status and conduit of all negativity is not a new one within leadership theory (Mintzberg 2010), in a sector that tends to be viewed as more collegiate, this view of Principal as figurehead is a more recent construct. Lambert (2013) described the outward, public facing role of the Principal representing their college as one of figurehead. This contrasts with more dated literature that stresses the need for the head of an educational establishment to become an effective manager, rather than merely a figurehead (Pinkney 1987; Maeroff, 1989).

Background

At this point, it is useful to review some of the policies and initiatives relating to Further Education and leadership to provide background and context to the current leadership situation. The need for leadership development for both those in and those aspiring to, senior leadership roles has been a constant theme in the last 20 years. The Government's 'Success for All' strategy, launched in 2002, aimed to reform Further Education and training. Developing and improving the quality of leadership formed a key part of this, strategies proposed included setting up a new Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) to deliver leadership programmes for the sector. The strategy identified as essential the need for colleges to carry out succession planning so that individuals could participate in training and professional development prior to their elevation to the position of Principal to prepare them for a leadership role. This was in part in response to concerns voiced that there may be a shortage of individuals ready to take up Principal positions.

A study by Frearson referred to a "succession crisis in parts of the sector" (Frearson 2003, 9) which would be exacerbated due to the large number of senior leaders predicted to retire in the following four years. Jameson (2006) also referred to the urgent need to address this crisis, again in relation to the pending retirement of a large number of senior leaders within the sector

and in common with Frearson (2003), stressed the need to develop strategies for succession planning. Away from the sector, the importance of succession planning has often been stressed in leadership literature (Estedadi et al 2015) but this understanding of its importance is not always reinforced by action to ensure that it happens. Fusarelli et al (2018) reinforce this point when looking at education in general and stress how the problems of high turnover of leadership staff can be addressed by the use of identification of talent and working in partnership with other organisations, something that is a challenge in the marketised FE sector.

The Foster Report highlighted the need to address leadership development and succession planning, stating that: 'It is important that the necessary incentives, resources and impact measures are provided over the next two years to bring about a quantum leap in leadership development and performance' (Foster 2005, 65). The 2006 FE White Paper Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances, which was a response to that report, reinforced the fact that strong leadership and management are essential when looking at any required improvements in quality. The paper also set out plans for a leadership qualification, which all newly appointed Principals would be expected to achieve. This came into force in September 2007 and aimed to support professional development, attract a wider range of potential leaders to the sector and also develop leadership skills. Whilst these aims were clearly a response to the needs of the sector and despite the fanfare of the launch, these regulations were revoked in November 2010. In the explanatory memorandum, it stated that removing the mandatory qualification would leave individuals free to select leadership and management training and development that best suits their needs and career. It could be argued that three years was not long enough to be able to evaluate the impact of this initiative on succession planning or leadership but the fact that the regulations were removed so quickly indicates the lack of coherency of thinking about the best solution to ensure high quality leadership in the sector. Alongside this, in 2009 CEL was merged with the Quality Improvement Agency to form the Learning and Skills Improvement

Service (LSIS). This new sector led organisation was dedicated to the development of the further education and skills sector as it sought to accelerate the drive for excellence through priority areas including leadership and management. They offered a wide range of support, training and qualifications for those working in the sector. However, LSIS ceased to exist in 2013 following removal of their funding. The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) has built on the legacy of LSIS and continues to provide opportunities for leaders and managers in the sector.

An ongoing issue, which was identified by Foster (2005), was the failure of the sector to attract talent from outside; indeed, at the time of the report it was estimated that 95% of Principals came from an FE background. Weiss, Cake and Theobold (2014, 2) note the 'relatively closed nature of the sector' and suggested this may impact on the willingness to look outside the sector for advice and a new perspective. A FETL report (2016) identifies the potential that bringing in new ideas and perspectives could have, but acknowledges that it is essential to provide information on the sector, the organisation and the challenges faced to ensure applicants are fully informed. Greany et al (2014) agree that it is vital for the sector to focus on succession planning and on providing both support for potential leaders from inside and outside the sector. A leadership pipeline report for further education concluded that there was a lack of understanding from those outside the sector about its role, the education it provides and the students it serves (ETF 2014). There is a counter argument that those promoted from within the sector already understand its background, culture, policies and ways of working (FETL 2016) and so would be more suited to the role. Given the limited length of time most principals are in post, an issue we will discuss further later, this can be a significant advantage as it reduces any need for a new Principal to understand the wider sector. This helps both the individual appointed and the organisation, but the fact remains that in terms of leadership, the sector remains insular and the tendency is to avoid outside applications.

As with the more general issue of succession planning, these challenges are not unique to the further education sector. In 2014 the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) undertook research to identify the current situation in regard to talent pipelines within both UK public and private sector organisations. They reported that many organisations had underdeveloped talent plans and lacked a management development strategy and as a result succession planning was of significant concern. These concerns were mirrored by the Education and Training Foundation's (ETF) report on leadership pipelines in Further Education (ETF 2014). To help counter these problems a number of additional training programmes have been put in place, both by the ETF and other organisations linked to the sector. For example, in 2018 the ETF launched a Preparing for CEO programme to raise leadership capability and aid in succession planning in the sector. A 2019 FETL and SMF report identified six reasons why leadership in FE should be a focus, which included the challenging context within the sector and the pressures this places on Principals (Savours and Keohane 2019). Following on from this report, developing leadership in FE colleges was explored by Keohane (2019) who identified five areas for reform and made a number of recommendations to strengthen leadership and develop a pipeline of talent. The areas include support for current sector leaders, it is suggested that the focus here could be on networking, by drawing on the expertise of experienced and retired Principals and also through cross public sector working. This is followed by the need to improve the leadership pipeline through investing in training and development which could be subsidised to encourage participation, alongside the creation of a career plan guide for FE. It is also suggested that a consultation could take place to identify whether to create a formal qualification similar to the Professional Headship in schools. It could be noted however that that this was last tried in 2007 and only lasted three years. The report then goes on to consider bringing leaders in from outside further education, from allied sectors or those that share similar values and the development of an induction programme to facilitate this. It also covers the need

to make FE roles more attractive which includes a changing the culture to one of learning rather than blame and 'improving leaders' ability to secure good outcomes for their learners' (Keohane 2019, 9). In October 2020 the Independent Commission on the College of the Future published their final report which presented recommendations for implementing a vision of what colleges should look like from 2030 and beyond. The focus for leadership is on 'diverse and representative systems leaders' identifying the need to work with college leaders to promote systems leadership development. This emerging approach stresses collective action to achieve systemic change. It can be described as 'a departure from traditional top-down, hierarchical and linear approaches to implementing change. Instead it requires innovative and adaptive approaches that engage broad networks of diverse stakeholders to advance progress toward a shared vision for systemic change' (Drier, Nabarro and Nelson 2019, 4). The College of the Future Report identifies that opportunities to develop the skills needed by systems leaders should be built in to strategic and sector wide plans.

Succession Planning

It is important to identify what is understood by succession planning, Garman and Glawe (2004) define it as the process by which an organisation identifies and develops the leadership capacity of individuals so that they are able to move into senior positions as they become available. It should occur at all levels within an organisation and involves not only providing of opportunities for those who want to progress, but also monitoring of the process to ensure there are a number of individuals developing the right skills and abilities. It should be seen as an opportunity to develop and expand the number of potential candidates from both inside and outside the organisation prior to a vacancy arising (Martin and Samels 2006). There are a number of different approaches to succession planning, Conger and Fulmer (2003) highlight

the importance of bringing together the twin strands of succession planning and leadership development in a process called succession management. They believe that it is critical to provide leadership development opportunities to ensure that individuals are acquiring the right skills set to enable them to progress. Part of this process is identifying the future direction of the organisation and what type of leaders you need to achieve this (Davies and Davies 2011). Within the world of business, succession planning is well established, much of the research available therefore has been conducted on large organisations where it is embedded into the culture to ensure a smooth transition from one CEO to the next. Whilst this is useful in providing ideas and identifying trends these may not easily be transferable to the FE sector.

Integral to succession planning is identifying talent within the organisation and having opportunities in place to develop it (Riddick 2009). There are different approaches to this, but a starting point is to identify the skills, abilities and behaviours required to fulfil key positions within the organisation. These can then inform the criteria used to identify future leadership potential. Effective succession planning links talent development and future demands for leaders, highlighting career development path for aspiring leaders (National College 2010). If an effective succession plan is in place, it can ensure that authority is transferred from one individual to the next whilst maintaining the core stability of the organisation (Ritchie 2020). Hargreaves (2005) identifies that a change of leadership is one of the most significant events a school will undergo. McCloughlin (2018) highlights the importance of succession planning for the future of the sector to provide the 'stability, confidence and ambition' needed to ensure smooth transitions between leaders.

There appears to be relatively small amount of literature that relates to succession planning in further education colleges. Fusarelli et al (2018) noted that succession planning is not as common in education as it is in the business world, whilst Davies and Davies (2011) identified that there were a host of barriers to its implementation within organisations such as it being

outside the scope of expertise for many people, a reluctance to take on the task, or the challenges of an ever-changing environment. Lack of focus on succession in schools can be due to 'oversight, neglect, or the pressures of crisis management' (Hargreaves 2005, 167) which seems relevant to the current situation within the sector and the challenges identified earlier.

It is against this context that the role of the Principal and succession planning within FE are considered. The area is currently under researched in the sector, with relatively few studies on which to draw. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the literature by exploring the views of current FE Principals on succession planning both within their individual organisations and across the wider sector.

Methodology

This initial pilot study into the changing role of college principals and the succession planning that takes place within the sector consisted of a desk based review of the role of the Principal using publicly available numerical data and seven, in-depth, semi structured interviews with current Principals. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were used to provide flexibility and give participants the opportunity to provide opinions and give examples based on their experiences. The interview started with questions (available in Appendix A) about the individual's route to becoming Principal and how they viewed the role. It then moved onto the challenges of the role and whether the individual felt prepared for these. This was followed by an exploration of succession planning, both inside their organisation and across the sector as a whole, looking at the challenges and opportunities moving forwards. Participants were provided with information about the study, ethical approval was gained from Liverpool John

Moores university and participants remain anonymous. The interviews were conducted using video calling via MSTeams and Zoom, with each interview lasting approximately 40 minutes.

All interviews were recorded to enable them to be fully transcribed and reviewed by both researchers, who worked together to identify and agree the themes emerging from the data. This thematic approach helped ensure that connections between the interviews were made and that commonality of wording was identified.

Findings

Review of desk-based research of current senior leaders

Given the move towards the corporatisation of education (Courtney 2015), it is interesting to note that, in many cases, the job title of the person at the top of the organisation has changed. The traditional role of 'College Principal' is being replaced by that of 'Chief Executive' who might be responsible for a number of separate colleges. Whilst on the face of it, this might appear to be a minor change of nomenclature, this mirrors the changes in compulsory education within the UK, in particularly with the advent of Multi Academy Trusts (Courtney 2015) and means that the modern educational leader is required to be fluent in the language of business as well as education. The changing name reflects a changing role and is in line with the rationale behind the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (DfE 1992). Whilst the Act encouraged expertise to be utilised from the private sector, this has met with minimal success; out of the Principals in post in 2021, only seven were recruited from outside further education and even then, all bar two came from other parts of the public sector. Hence, almost 99% of Principals might be described as 'home grown' (AoC 2021).

Analysing current college Principals and CEOs presents an interesting picture of the people doing this vital role. The average length of tenure reveals that 107 Principals were appointed

in 2016 or after (equating to 62%). This indicates that almost two thirds have been in post less than five years, indeed at the time of writing, almost 20% of Principals had not yet been in the role for a year. Whilst that in itself might not be viewed as a problem given that research suggests that a regular 'churn' of ideas can be beneficial (Firestone and Martinez 2007), it does mean that succession planning and building leadership capacity, is vital given the short time Principals are in post.

It is also interesting to note the backgrounds of those appointed. As can be seen in Table 1,

Internal	40%	External (Total)	60%	Principal before	25%	External Vice Principal/Deputy Principal before	23%	Other	12%

Table 1: Previous roles of principals of General FE colleges

Whilst the majority of appointments were from external organisations, all bar two were from other educational establishments and a significant number (a quarter) moved between Principalships. This means that whilst the college might benefit from a more experienced person taking on the role, internal candidates' are a minority and might need to move elsewhere in order to progress their career. The situation is even more exaggerated when looking at the role of the interim Principal. At the time of writing, approximately 5% of Principals were classed as such, a figure that has stayed stable in the last few years. Interim Principals tend to be appointed when a college has suffered problems and in almost all cases, an external person is appointed. Whilst again, this can be seen as something that has sound business reasoning to it, if a college has had a problem, then an external appointment can bring a fresh perspective. It also means that applicants with previous experience are appointed, indicating either a reluctance to trust new people, or an engrained conservativism that relies on trusted solutions

to problems faced. Either way, this could be seen as another barrier to progression and talent management.

Interview Findings

A number of themes were identified from the interview transcripts in relation to the role of the Principal and issues around succession planning. These have been grouped into themes in this section and any variations between responses have been identified.

Figurehead in a Financially Stretched Sector.

The challenges identified by our participants mirror those mentioned in the literature review, with many focusing around the need to respond to constant change in the sector and implement new Government policies and directives. The context was described as '*complex*' and resulted in a position described by several of the participants as '*reactive*' and one of constantly '*balancing priorities*'.

The financial position was also highlighted:

> *"The sector is in a dangerous place at the moment and I think that it is important that we raise its profile and also to try to get more money in. Augar was a golden opportunity but I am not sure if this is going to help, it feels as though things are drifting a little. FE has never been a fashionable sector but raising its profile will show that it is still important."*

> Principal A

The feeling was expressed throughout the interviews that there was still a lack of understanding about the breadth of the sector and its value, with an ongoing need to raise the profile and articulate the contribution it makes, described by one Principal (B) as "*constant explaining*".

In terms of the role of Principal, it was acknowledged that you had to accept you were the figurehead for the organisation.

> *"I mean you have to accept that you are a figurehead and it takes some getting used to at first."*

<div align="right">Principal C</div>

> *"I think the role is as a figurehead of course but also it's about putting together the best possible team, if I get that right then my job is easy."*

<div align="right">Principal A</div>

This particular Principal, who was one of the most experienced ones interviewed, articulated the dichotomy of the role. On one hand, the person at the top is seen as the figurehead and they represent the organisation, but they are also unable to fully influence the success of the organisation without a team behind them. Another experienced Principal reinforced this point:

> *You've got to be out there and the staff have got to believe that you are always out there promoting the college and fighting their corner and if they do that then they will go along with you. They are not really bothered about what the Principal does, along as they are keeping the organisation stable, financially solid, equality and diversity, all on message and most staff won't give a second thought to what your workload looks like, but if you start doing it wrong it becomes apparent.*

<div align="right">*Principal D*</div>

The figurehead role comes across strongly in this quote, as does the generally expressed view that few people know what a Principal actually does, instead they are just looking for them to represent them and in effect, be the leader of the organisation. This creates an interesting situation as if we accept that this is true then it is the leadership qualities that are key to being a successful principal, something that could be found either inside or outside the sector. Given that 99% of principals are recruited from within the sector, it does raise the question about innate conservativism of those appointing principals.

Principal as Football Manager

A common theme expressed by participants was that the figurehead was the one who was always blamed when anything went wrong in the organisation; as Principal A stated, *"it's easy to blame the guy at the top isn't it?"* Given the datafication of the sector that has occurred (Stevenson 2017) there are regular opportunities for Principals to be put under pressure. Inspections by Ofsted might well be a key driver for judging the success of a leader in the sector, but given regular updates on retention, pass rates and achievement, there is a continual stream of events that Principals need to be aware of in addition to maintaining the financial stability and viability of their organisation.

There were multiple examples of participants likening themselves to figureheads and stressing how this increasing focus on judging on results mirrors that which occurs for football managers, with the latest result often being viewed as more important than successes that occurred previously. Several of our participants made football-based analogies and the number of Principals who have left their post after a poor performance at inspection, suggests that the comparison is a valid one. This simile has been used when referring to school head teachers (Hart 2004) and given the significantly higher turnover of Principals in FE, is clearly relevant

in this sector. The link with Lambert (2013) who likened principals to figureheads is clearly one that participants are aware of.

For those who had been in the position longer, they had seen the role become more complex over time. This meant an increase in monitoring data and outcomes and whilst it is expected that in a Government funded organisation there would be a level of scrutiny over performance, this could lead to difficulties

> *"The context is so complex that that's changed and a college can get into trouble in a way through no fault whatsoever of the Principal, you know you can suddenly find you've got a hole in your data or finances and so in that sense I think the job is riskier even if you are performing okay"*

> Principal C

The impact of this situation can result in feelings of insecurity.

> *"I don't think it's a long career now, one bad bit of news and the governors get twitchy."*

> Principal A

These quotes reinforce the similarities with the football manager. The role of figurehead, the relatively short time in post and the fact they tend to be replaced after a bad result could be said to be true for both roles. Ultimately both roles are results driven and poor performance can impact job security.

Succession Planning in Light of this Environment

The short-term approach that is inherent in the discussion above also appears to influence decisions made when succession planning, which it could be suggested has led to an innate

conservatism in the sector when selecting a new Principal. Again, the football manager analogy can be used:

> *"You could imagine the top premiership like Manchester City is never going to appoint an untested number two in a smaller club even if they have done really well they are probably going to take an experienced European winning manager because they can and I think big colleges might think that actually I don't want to take on a number two in my organisation I want to take somebody who has been in a slightly smaller organisation at the number one level done a good job, therefore knows the job already, it's a less risky solution"*

<div align="right">Principal C</div>

This need to look for less risky solutions, or a safe pair of hands came across in several of the interviews:

> *"What was interesting was for my successor we tended to have either existing Principals and rising stars apply but the rising stars just didn't know about the role and it means we tend to recycle the old guard. We play it safe and that isn't great."*

<div align="right">Principal A</div>

This view was supported by Principal F:

> *You're not going to put a new inexperienced Principal into a complicated organisation, and if you are, you're going to have to put a lot of support in to feel like that's going to be okay.*

<div align="right">Principal F</div>

The innate conservatism that Principal C mentioned means that colleges always have a 'fall back' position of being able to select someone who has already held the role. As with football managers, this might mean that you can benefit from their expertise and knowledge or a less positive view would be that you are selecting someone who, whilst experienced, is unlikely to bring any surprises to the role.

Given the rapid turnover of Principals it might be expected that succession planning is high on the agenda, however this study suggests that that is not the case. The lack of stability and need to be reactive mentioned earlier means that whilst those interviewed acknowledged its importance, there was only limited time to plan for the longer term future. The comments below illustrate this situation:

> *I do feel as though it is not something we think about. Maybe because the day to day life is so busy? I want to start something – it will be talent management and give people the opportunity to try new roles and to give them skills. The problem is time, the best people are busy but even so, I feel as though we can do something.*
>
> *Principal E*

> *I think we probably do need to have some sort of career progression strategy in place. In my college we know who the rising stars are but so much of the time we are so busy that we can't do anything other than chase our tails. The problem of course is also that the best people do all the work as well so they are too busy to worry about being Principals. So time is key and also training.*
>
> *Principal A*

> *We keep our eyes on who is performing well but it is difficult. There are so many demands on our time that we tend to forget about what is happening internally.*
>
> *Principal B*

Lack of time and being busy are likely to be exacerbated by the challenging context within the sector and the pace of change.

Where actions were taken to try and address succession planning they appeared to be limited, as Principal A went on to explain.

We try but to be blunt, we don't do a great job. I try to mentor a few people who I think would be good at the higher level but I am not sure if that is anything other than informal help and advice.

Principal A

This attempt to do something internally was evident in other colleges:

Yes, we didn't have those conversations before actually but we had them in the last few years about you know, do you aspire to be a Principal if you do can we send you on the Oxford course other things we can do to prepare you so that that's an option.

Principal C

We do things internally and externally and then we have a senior leadership programme which we do internally where we will target people through appraisals.

Principal D

The actions described by these Principals are likely to be beneficial to their organisation but they do little for the sector as a whole. There are a number of courses that aspiring Principals can take, some of which are titled as senior leadership development rather than specifically for the role of Principal or CEO. One Principal who had participated in this type of development

described it as *'a really positive environment'* but reflected on whether it was too early yet to see the impact of these programmes on succession planning in the sector.

Overall the identification of talent does appear to be done on an *ad hoc* approach rather than anything which is structured to help the sector as a whole. This was a theme that was taken up during the interviews with a number of suggestions put forward including '*secondments between colleges', 'mentoring schemes', and 'an academy for aspiring leaders'.* Those who had a mentor felt that this had benefitted them, with Principal E describing the experience of mentoring as *'really powerful and massively helpful'* although in one case the mentor was described as unofficial, indicating that these arrangements although supportive were sometimes informal. Experienced Principals indicated they would be willing to mentor others.

> *I think that there ought to be some sort of scheme where serving Principals are encouraged to give up some of their time for people outside of their college because again I do think it needs doing. Something that is recognised and acknowledged and so many people are taken on board*

> *Principal D*

For those aspiring to the role, access to serving Principals from a range of organisations was thought to be useful in providing a breadth of experience, as it was acknowledged that what works well in one college may not always transfer to another setting. The opportunity to network with other Principals both when aspiring to and once in the role, was also seen as beneficial. This could play an important role in providing support:

> *Having opportunities to build a network as you head towards that journey, so you don't feel like you are on your own, there are other people you can talk to who are outside of your area.*

> Principal F

Both the mentoring and networking could however be considered to be more of an ad hoc rather than a systematic approach to succession planning.

In moving forward and addressing these issues, a period of stability would be welcomed by Principal D who described how it was important to focus on the individual person and their development, not on teaching them how to cope with particular situations as these changed all the time.

Effective succession planning within individual organisations would over time have a cumulative effect resulting in increased capacity within the sector as a whole.

> *I think it is the sector rather than the college that needs to do this. If we are all identifying future leaders then we have a big pool to work from.*
>
> *Principal A*

Discussion

Desk based research identified that almost 99% of Principals at the time of the study had progressed from within the FE sector. It would appear that although the benefits of bringing individuals from outside the sector have been identified (FETL 2016) in practice this isn't yet happening. Exploring the reasons for this is outside the scope of this article although there is some evidence that recruiting from within could be seen as a safer option as the individual appointed will already understand the nature and role of the sector with the need for less 'explaining'. With the current datafication of the sector (Stevenson 2017), as well as the cycle of inspections, the tendency is to look for solutions that appear to be less of a risk. Hence, hiring a principal who knows the sector and who has worked in the role before does, superficially, look like a sensible approach. However, when analysing the data, the fact that the majority of

principals spend such a short time in the role suggests that the 'easy' answer is not necessarily the one that provides long-term stability.

The challenges of working in a sector which is undergoing almost continuous change was highlighted by the Principals in the study. This meant the context within which they were working was complex and fostered the need to be reactive to changing priorities. This policy churn is well documented in the literature (Hanley and Orr 2019) and whilst its effects are felt across the sector, its impact on those at leadership level was evident in the responses.

It was clear that the role could be described as being the figurehead for the organisation. This was previously identified by Lambert (2013) in describing the outward facing role the Principal has and came through clearly in the responses. This prominence of the person at the top of the organisation combined with the changing and challenging nature of the sector has led to a high profile, high stakes situation where if something goes wrong they can be a target. It was suggested that this could happen due to issues with data or finance that might not necessarily be directly the fault of the Principal but that they would still be the one held responsible.

It might not seem at first glance that there is much similarity between the role of football manager and further education Principal. However, upon examination there are many parallels, some of which were alluded to by the interviewees in the study. The role of figurehead, the relatively short time in post and the fact they tend to be replaced after a bad result could be said to be true for both roles. Football management has changed dramatically over recent decades with an increasing focus on financial matters and a heightened level of scrutiny around performance (Morrow and Howieson 2014); this is not dissimilar to current issues within FE. In football the manager acts as a figurehead for the club and according to Mills (2019, 11) 'unlike players, managers are often held solely responsible for team failure'. This is reinforced by Coleman (2021) who stressed the way in which football managers act as a conduit for all

publicity for an organisation. There are similarities here with the role of Principal, the financial pressures, the focus on performance and the way in which a bad result, in the case of education this might well be linked to a poor inspection, can have a detrimental impact on an individual's career. Ultimately both roles are results driven and poor performance can impact job security. In reviewing the relationship between football managers and the media, Carter (2007) describes how managers are seen as the figurehead, are the spotlight for media attention and blamed when things go wrong. This is seen in the FETL work concerning shame within the FE Sector and its impact on leaders; an example of this comes from Bazelgatte and Harrison (2020, 20) where a participant in the study also refers to 'the football manager approach to college leadership'. This need to change the culture to one of learning rather than blame was one of the recommendations made by Keohane (2019) in order to make the FE roles more attractive.

In regard to succession planning, some of the suggestions made by the Principals in the study align with those in the literature. For example, mentors and mentoring was seen as hugely positive in providing support by those in the study. Whilst the arrangements they were describing were informal, this could be established as a formal scheme. Keohane (2019) put forward the recommendation that experienced and retired Principals could form a network of support for those new to the role and this could include mentoring. In this way the support would become more formalised with an offer for new or aspiring Principals to access rather than seeking out informal support. The other suggestions made by the Principals such as secondments between colleges and an academy for aspiring leaders are perhaps more challenging to implement. Certainly, there are a number of courses available for those looking to develop their leadership skills and where Principals had participated in these they were seen as valuable, and the opportunities they provided for networking were seen as a key benefit.

In the responses it was evident that although some individual approaches were being made to try and address succession planning, these were not embedded in the practice of the colleges.

Having plans in place to identify talent within a college and provide development opportunities requires a change in culture and approach. This needs to occur alongside other initiatives previously suggested such as mentoring and support. If succession planning were embedded across the sector then this would start to address some of the current challenges. This requires identifying the skills and attributes required by future leaders and designing appropriate training and development programmes to enable individuals to develop these. The aim would be to ensure a pipeline of potential leaders from both inside and outside the sector.

Limitations

There are some limitations in the data collected for this study. Whilst there was some agreement in the interview findings that those who might aspire to Principalships are too busy doing their current roles to consider it, this can only be considered an observation. Whilst the literature does support the suggestions that the role of the middle manager is extremely busy (Wolstencroft and Lloyd 2019) they were not interviewed for this study so we cannot state that this is the reason they have chosen not to progress. Interviewing middle managers about succession planning could be addressed in future research work. Finally, it should also be acknowledged that although the interviewees represent a cross section of Principals in England, they only represent around 5% of the total number.

Conclusion

There appear to be tangible risks involved in not addressing the current issues, not least the lack of potential suitable applicants for senior leadership positions within the sector. The complexity in the sector and the impact on organisations and the individuals who lead them is evident, dealing with this complexity can leave little time for succession planning. The issues

around a lack of time and the daily pressures of management do not have easy answers but are worthy of consideration if individuals are going to have the space to develop as leaders. Whilst many have discussed the need for there to be a pipeline of talent, the jobs at the end of the pipeline still need to be attractive. If there is no pull towards obtaining a Principalship then the sector has no option but to continue to rely on the same pool of people for each vacancy. Whilst ensuring that there is a pipeline of talent is important, the problems for colleges do not end with the appointment of a new leader. The move towards a more 'football manager' based approach means that the average tenure of a Principal is comparatively short which means that a near constant supply of new leaders is needed. Whilst this might suggest a negative picture typified by a 'hire and fire' attitude, the reality from participants in this research did not reflect this negativity. The majority of those interviewed clearly loved the job, despite its challenges, and they expressed satisfaction that their Principal role allowed them the potential to make a positive contribution to the sector as well as being able to support others aspiring or new to the role.

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Appendix A

Questions to Principals

Interview Schedule

        a. Initial Information:

                i. How long have you been in a senior management position?

                ii. Can you describe your route to becoming a principal?

                iii. Did you undertake any training (formal or informal) prior to becoming a principal?

b. How would you describe the role?

c. What are the major challenges of the role?

d. Did you feel adequately prepared for the role beforehand (if not – what would you have liked to be put in place?)

e. How would you describe the current situation in the sector in regard to succession planning?

f. What challenges and opportunities are there for the sector in developing succession planning?

g. Does your college have any mechanisms (formal or informal) to identify people with leadership potential who could become leaders?

h. What can the sector do to encourage people to become leaders?

i. What advice would you give to those who are looking to apply for the role leadership positions?

j. Have you anything else you would like to add?