

Research report

The future of further education

An opinion survey



Peter Davies, Frank Villeneuve-Smith,
Ewan McKenzie and Silvia Munoz



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Foreword

In a world of change and uncertainty it's no surprise that few clear messages came out of this survey of staff from across the further education (FE) sector. In partnership with *Guardian* further education pages, we investigated whether the sector's workforce supports the government's vision for the future, the degree of consensus and people's own visions for the future.

If one clear message did come out of the survey, it is that colleges are looking for more autonomy, the freedom to develop their own qualifications and manage their own quality improvement, and the opportunity to offer more higher education courses.

One remarkable result was the degree to which the sector supports the government's funding priorities. In particular, people appeared to prioritise learning that supports future employment opportunities over non-vocational learning.

The survey only hints at what is to come. I believe that recent changes in legislation are beginning to provide the degree of freedom needed for a range of innovative organisational structures to emerge. FE colleges now have, or shortly will have, the freedom to innovate, the ability to share sovereignty or to pass parts of their core function to a third party. This may open up a Pandora's box of shared services, joint ventures, special purpose vehicles and new patterns of governance.

I personally believe that the future changes to further education will be more than just changes to structures, responsibilities, funding and organisational arrangements. There are a number of significant changes to how we see teaching and learning itself on the near horizon. One is the emergence of the Web 2.0 generation of learners. Web 2.0 is not just about blogs, Wikis and social networks. It underpins a shift in student expectations – from recipient to participant. Tomorrow's learners will be able to select from what they are offered and create what they need – working with us, their peers and anyone else in the communities they choose.

The design of learning spaces will also evolve. As learners spend more time learning online, at home or in the office, there will be more emphasis on the social role of the campus. It will become a more important part of the 'college experience', and increasingly exploited for the development of 'soft' social, networking and team-building skills – skills critical for employability.

It is already common for businesses reliant on extensive home working and hot-desking to set up social facilities. In this way canteens and leisure facilities may be drawn into the education process. Libraries and IT centres may be increasingly difficult to justify as personal mobile computers become the norm with information available any time, any place, anywhere. This will itself drive curriculum change as the acquisition of information decreases in relevance and the analysis, application and creation of knowledge take its place.

The biggest changes, however, will be the ones we don't expect. Choices are increasingly thrust upon us and institutions will have to make those choices quickly – whether consciously or by default. In essence, the above represents a range of scenarios to consider as we seek to manage the risks of the future.

John Stone

Chief Executive, Learning and Skills Network

1 Executive summary

This research investigates the future direction of the further education (FE) sector. It looks at whether there is any consensus among the sector's workforce on key issues and the degree to which people support the government's vision for the future. It also explores the views of staff working in the FE sector on its future direction.

The project was undertaken in partnership with the *Guardian* further education pages. A total of 1268 people from across the sector completed an online questionnaire and shared their opinions. Responses came from a wide range of staff – lecturers, managers and senior managers.

Key messages from the survey include:

1. People working in the sector think that colleges should have greater autonomy in the development of curriculum and qualifications.

An overwhelming 93% of people thought that colleges should have the freedom to develop curriculum and qualifications that meet the specific needs of local businesses. There was clear support for this idea among managers and senior managers, with more than 6 out of 10 people from each of these grades indicating that they strongly agreed with the idea.

The majority of people (56%) agreed that colleges should be able to accredit their own qualifications. Senior managers were the group most likely to support this idea, with more than six out of 10 saying they agreed.

2. People would like to move away from the focus on national priorities and believe that the curriculum should reflect both national and local needs.

The survey explored whether FE-sector staff believe that curriculum should reflect national or local priorities. The vast majority (70%) of survey respondents believed that the curriculum should reflect an even mix of the two. There was a broad consensus on the issue across different grades of staff with just over 7 out of 10 lecturers, managers and senior managers agreeing with this idea.

People also thought that the curriculum should reflect both the needs of learners and the demands of employers. Seven out of 10 people said that they believed the curriculum should reflect an even mix of the two.

3. People believe that the sector needs more high-calibre graduates and vocational specialists. However, they don't believe that the sector has the right pay and conditions to attract and retain new highly talented people.

More than 7 out of 10 people who responded to the survey believed that recruiting high-calibre graduates will benefit the sector. With just under 80% of senior managers agreeing, this group were more likely to support the idea than lecturers or managers.

There was also a great deal of support for recruiting more highly skilled vocational specialists into the sector, with 93% of people agreeing with this idea. Again, senior managers were more likely than lecturers or managers to express support for this idea.

However, nearly 9 out of 10 people who responded to the survey thought that the pay and conditions in the sector weren't suitable for attracting highly talented people. With 90% of managers reporting that this is the case, they were the group most likely to hold this view.

4. Despite a spate of criticism, the sector appears to back the government's emphasis on funding provision that supports the development of skills.

People who took part in the survey were given a list of 14 activities in the FE sector and asked to prioritise them for funding. This question revealed perhaps the most surprising result in the survey. In line with current government thinking, the sector prioritised provision that supports the development of skills above other sorts of programmes.

Provision that supports the development of vocational skills for work made up the top three in the ranking. Vocational qualifications for young people ranked number one, and so was given the greatest priority for funding among people in the sector. Level 2 qualifications for people in work achieved a number two ranking. Apprenticeships and other types of work-based training were ranked number three. Non-vocational adult learning appeared at the bottom of the ranking.

However, the respondents that provided comments on this question were quick to indicate that it's not that simple, with nearly half of the comments suggesting that all the areas listed are important or that it was too difficult to prioritise.

5. There is little consensus among FE sector staff on the best structure for the sector in the future.

The survey explored a number of key structural issues for the sector, but there was no great consensus among staff on the best direction. Most of the questions related to specific government reforms and regulation in the sector. For example:

- 36% of people disagreed and 25% agreed with the idea that moving 14–19 funding to local authorities will lead to better outcomes for learners
- 45% of people disagreed and 19% agreed with the idea that college mergers benefit learners and employers – with 35% stating that they neither agreed nor disagreed
- 53% of people agreed and 29% disagreed with the idea that colleges should be subject to national targets.

Money for quality improvement was the only area of questioning that uncovered a strong consensus of opinions in the sector. The vast majority of staff who responded to the survey (84.6%) believed that money for quality improvement should go straight to the sector.

2 Introduction and research aims

Last November, John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, informed delegates at the Association of Colleges annual conference that he would be seeking their views on the future direction of the further education (FE) sector. During December 2007 a small group of college principals were invited to a two-day scenario planning session in London, hosted by the Secretary of State. From these discussions a shortlist of headings was developed for consideration at a further one-day gathering in Birmingham at the end of February, to which all the principals were invited.

These gatherings have taken place against a background of momentous governmental reforms of the education system – including the split of the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES) into two new departments, related changes in funding arrangements, the increased separation of pre- and post-19 age groups resulting, and the emphasis on the FE sector's primary role in delivering skills in line with the recommendations of the Leitch report. Critics within FE have not been slow to voice concerns about the threat to the nature of the system that they claim is posed as a consequence.

In parallel with these consultations, and at the request of the *Guardian* further education pages, the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) has carried out its own investigation into opinions about the future direction for FE. The overall aims were to check out the degree to which the government's vision for the sector is shared by its workforce, the degree of consensus that exists and the different routes – if any – down which some or all staff would like to proceed. Individuals working in all parts of the sector were invited to contribute their ideas by taking part in an online opinion poll survey. The response was enthusiastic – 1268 people returned completed questionnaires, including representatives of a wide range of staff from lecturers to senior managers.

This report sets out the results of the survey arranged according to the five main sections of the questionnaire, together with a commentary that seeks to interpret the findings and gauge their implications. In addition to the overall aggregates, the results of the survey are broken by three main groupings of respondent – lecturer, manager and senior manager.¹

1. Please note that the aggregate breakdowns also include a number of respondents outside these categories, who together represented fewer than 6% of the overall total.

3 Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed by the project team and consisted of a combination of multiple-choice, rank item and open-text response questions, that required individuals to either select the appropriate response box or insert an answer in a text box. The majority of questions asked respondents to read statements and indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed.

The survey was designed in an electronic format using the online survey software SNAP. The software was used to upload the questionnaire and generate a URL link which individuals could click on to access the survey.

The questionnaire was set out in four main sections:

- curriculum, qualifications and skills
- funding
- college structures and regulation
- seeking new staff for the FE sector.

See Appendix 1 for a copy of the questionnaire. A full tabulation of the results is attached as Appendix 2.

3.2 Questionnaire distribution

The survey was launched on 11 January 2008 and was emailed to all FE email contacts in LSN's Customer Information Management System dataset where there was an identified job role. The contact list was uploaded into the emailing software, Subscribe Software, so that the target population could be promptly contacted.

There were over 1200 respondents to the survey and their submissions were collected using the SNAP Survey software. The response rate provides a 99% confidence level to represent the view of FE staff with a 3.94% +/- confidence interval.

3.3 Profile of respondents

A total of 1268 completed questionnaires were eventually received in response to the invitation issued by LSN to participate in the survey. Taken overall, there was a good spread of respondents across the different grades of staff within the sector. Senior manager and manager grades were somewhat better represented in the survey than their actual proportions within the FE workforce – indicative, perhaps, of their greater interest in and influence over the strategic direction of their colleges. Female respondents were similarly better represented in the survey than they are in the sector overall, as were those in the upper age ranges (Table 1).

Table 1 Profile of respondents to survey

Respondents	No.	%
Gender:		
Female	753	59.4
Male	515	40.6
Age:		
Under 30	48	3.8
31–44 years	336	26.4
45–59 years	824	64.8
60 years or over	64	5.0
Grade:		
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	553	43.5
Manager	424	33.3
Senior manager/director/principal/ chief executive officer/head teacher	221	17.4
Other	74	5.8

4 Responses to the questionnaire

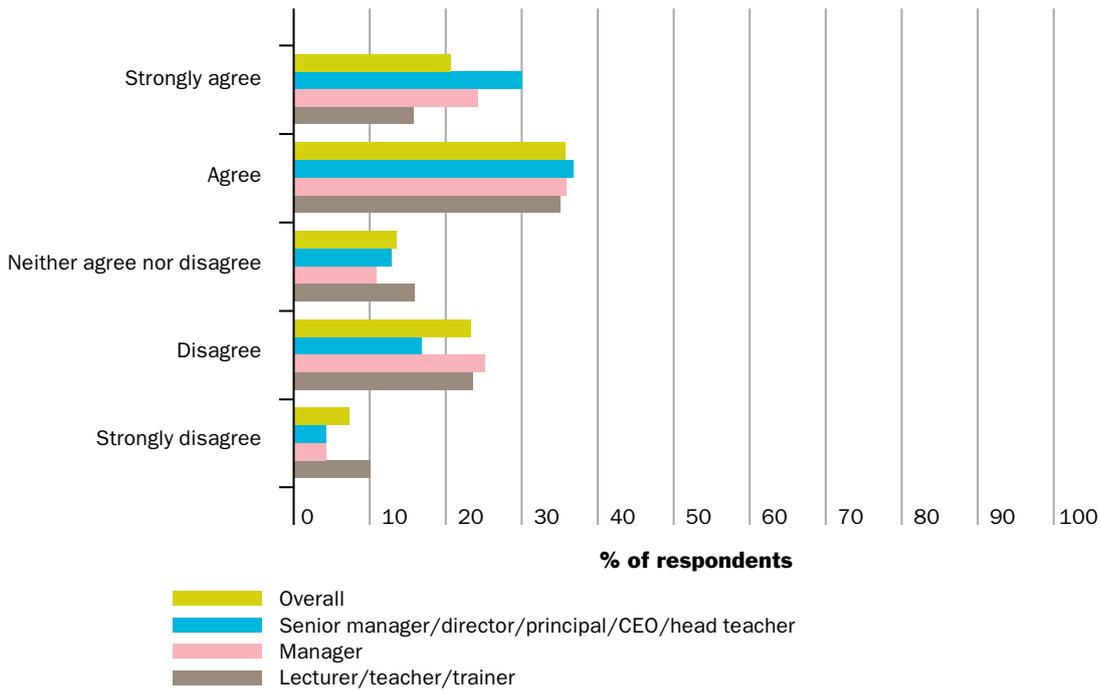
4.1 Curriculum, qualifications and skills

The first question in our survey asked respondents to indicate their strength of agreement with three statements concerning the extent of colleges' autonomy and powers in relation to those of the government, plus a further statement concerning the relationship between qualifications and skill levels. The primary aim of this line of questioning was to check the degree of support for the greater self-regulation that the government has indicated it would like to grant to the sector, and the extent to which those working in FE wish for even fewer limitations on their freedom of action. The last statement under Question 1 then aimed to test the level of agreement with the government's apparent belief in the close relationship between the qualifications held by the labour force and the skill levels within the national economy – a link whose strength has been challenged by some critics within the sector.

College powers to accredit qualifications

The first statement under Question 1 concerned whether or not colleges should be allowed to offer their own qualifications. On balance, most respondents supported this proposition, with over 56% indicating some measure of agreement, and under a third registering disagreement. Levels of agreement were notably stronger among senior managers than among other grades of respondent, with over two-thirds recording some level of agreement, and around 21% disagreeing (Figure 1).

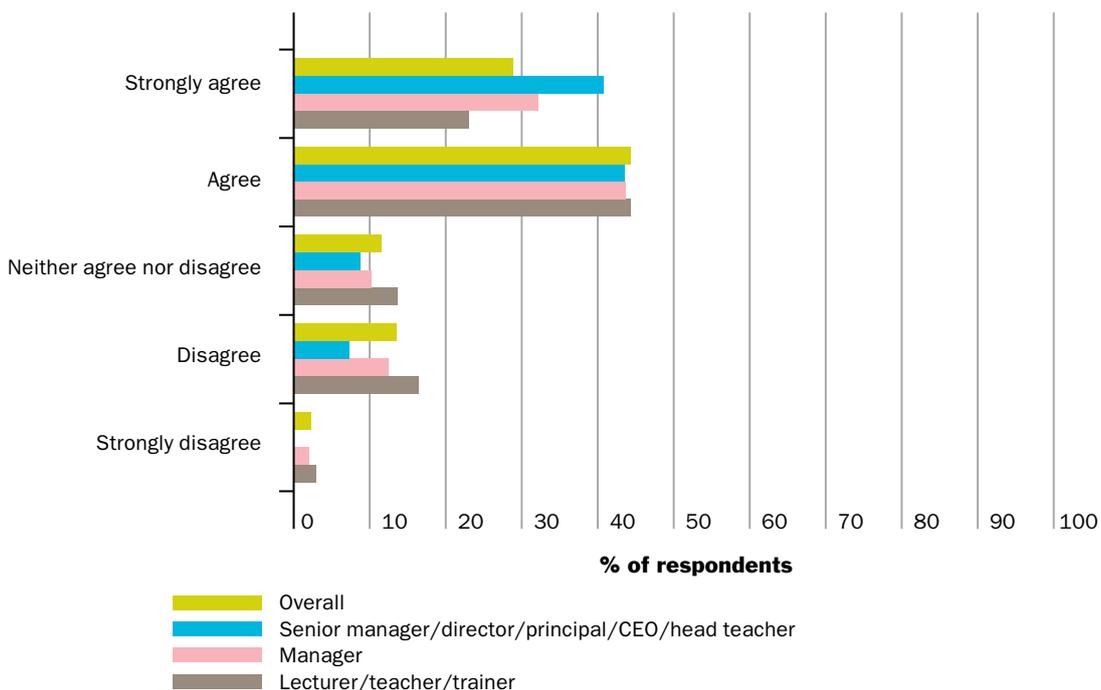
Figure 1 Colleges should be able to accredit their own qualifications



Colleges delivering HE courses

There was a rather stronger level of agreement with the second statement under Question 1 of our survey, which concerned whether or not colleges are well placed to offer higher education (HE) courses. Almost 73% of respondents agreed that they were, and fewer than 16% disagreed. Once again, senior managers were most likely strongly to agree, and lecturers to disagree, though even in the case of the latter around two-thirds supported colleges’ capability to offer HE (Figure 2).

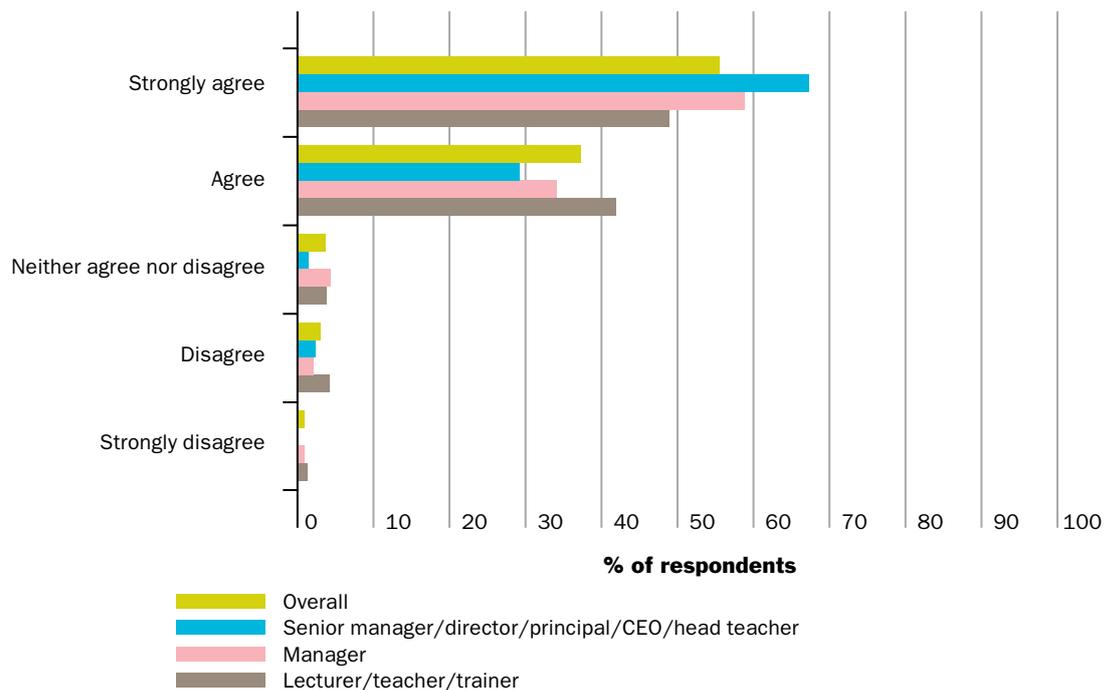
Figure 2 Colleges are well placed to offer higher education courses (eg degrees)



Freedom to meet the needs of local businesses

There were extremely strong levels of agreement that colleges should have the freedom to tailor the curricula and courses that they offer to fit the needs of local businesses. Some 93% of respondents supported this view – over 55% strongly so – and only around 4% opposed it, with relatively little difference across the different grades of staff (Figure 3).

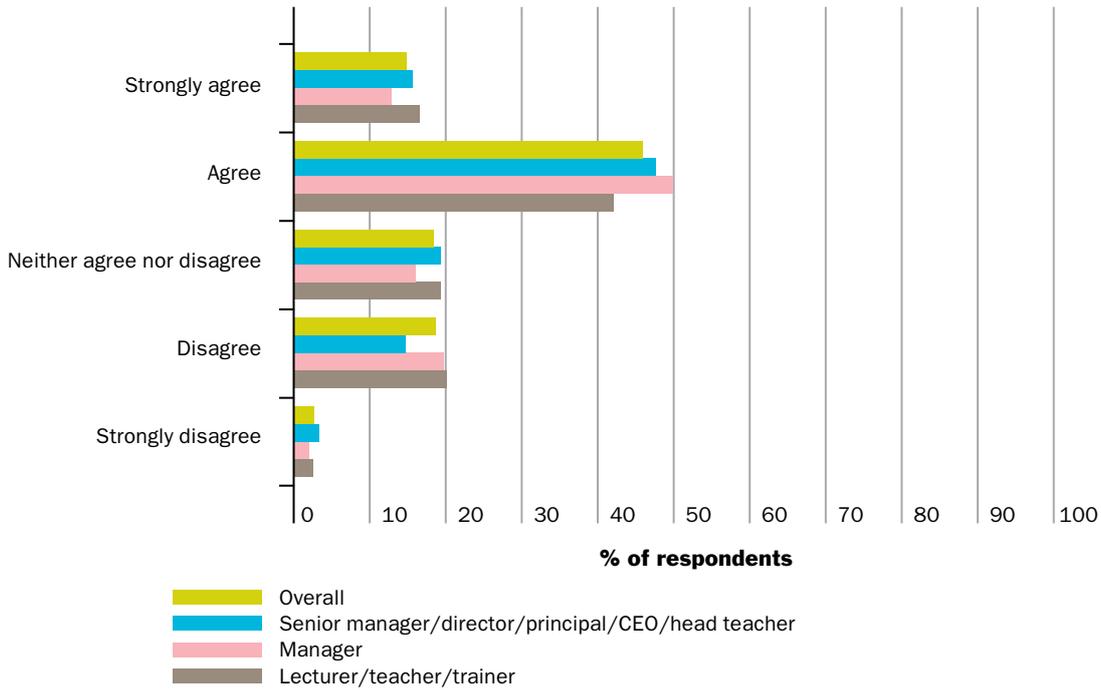
Figure 3 Colleges should be allowed to develop curriculum and qualifications that fit the specific needs of local businesses



Skills vs qualifications

On balance, there was also a good level of agreement with the government's view that the number and level of qualifications in the labour market is a good measure of the skills levels in the national economy. Over 60% of participants in our survey supported this view – though over 21% disagreed – with little variation between the different grades (Figure 4).

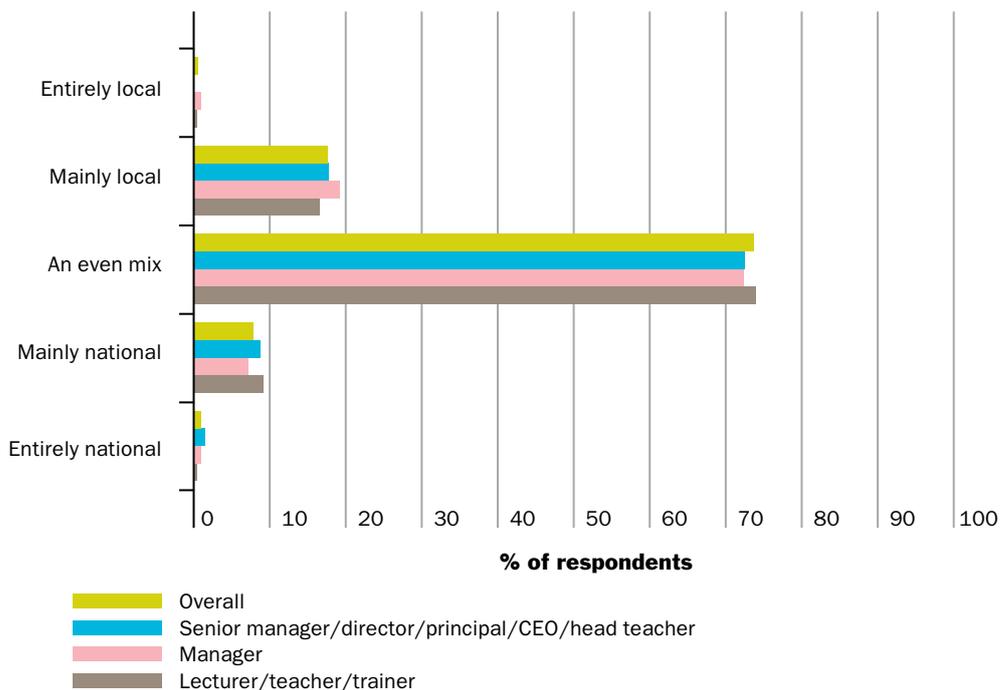
Figure 4 The number and level of qualifications held by the workforce is a good measure of the economy’s skill levels



Local vs national priorities

Question 2 of our survey concerned the degree to which college curricula should reflect national or local priorities. Almost three-quarters of respondents considered that the curriculum should reflect an even mix of national and local priorities. Among the remainder, rather more were inclined towards favouring local rather than national priorities. The spread of opinion on this issue was remarkably consistent across all grades of staff (Figure 5).

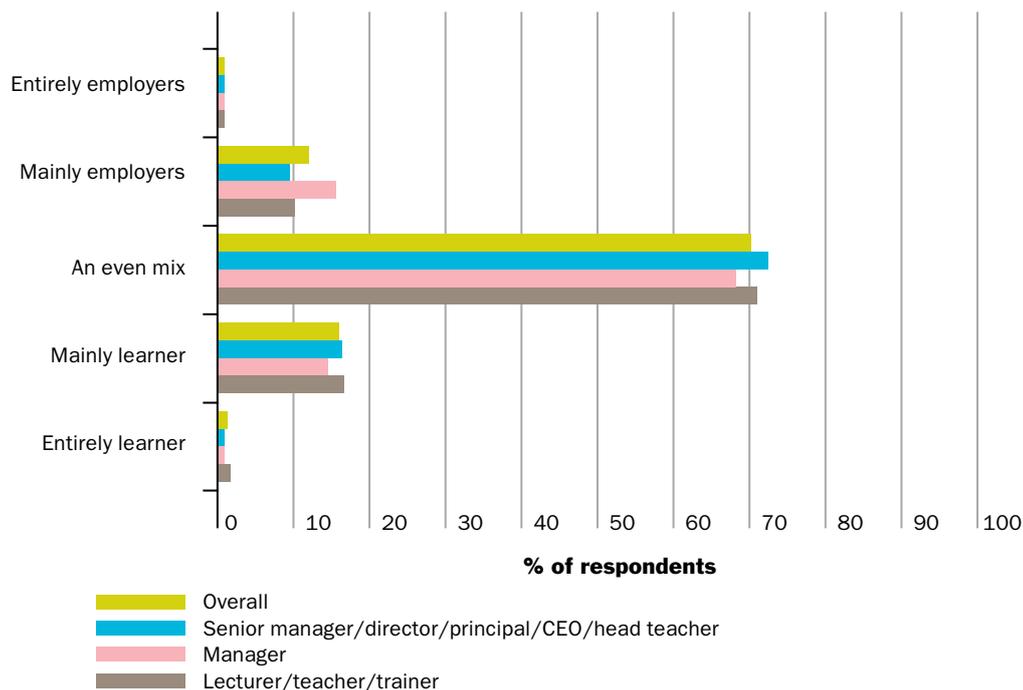
Figure 5 To what degree should college curriculum reflect national or local priorities?



Employers vs learners

The next question requested respondents' opinions of the degree to which the curriculum should reflect the needs of employers or of learners. Here again, the large majority (over 70%) felt that an even mix should be reflected, with a slight majority of the remainder favouring learners' needs over those of employers. Once again there was a notable consistency in the breakdown of responses across the different grades of staff who participated in our survey (Figure 6).

Figure 6 The curriculum of a college should reflect the needs of...



Participants' views

In question 4, survey participants were asked for any extra comments they wanted to make in relation to the first section of the questionnaire, and 303 (23.9%) took the opportunity to do so. The most common area of comment – by just under 29% – concerned workforce and employment skills. Here some respondents challenged the implication that the needs of employers and learners were necessarily in conflict, pointing out that most of the latter wanted entry to and/or progression in the labour market, and therefore required the appropriate skills, for instance:

If the student does not hold qualifications that meet the needs of employers how are they going to be employed?

...learners will be employed – we need to somehow break the vicious circle that means that learners do not have the skills employers want. This means look at the assessment regime right the way through the education system, to ensure we do not develop a workforce that is merely qualified to jump through hoops.

Almost the same number of respondents expressed views concerning the relationship of the curriculum to the needs of individual learners. Most of these took the line that ultimately the latter should be paramount, eg:

FE provides a starting point for continuing education well below a level that would meet the immediate needs of an employer – eg a creative writing course for a person with a mental health problem may provide confidence and communication skills before that learner is able to attempt a vocational course.

Ultimately, the learner (and often their parents) is the customer and we ignore this at our peril. Also, given the significant volume of the SME [small and medium-sized enterprise] and micro business sector in the UK a focus on employers is not as helpful as a focus on business potential.

Almost a quarter of those recording comments in response to Question 4 related them to the link between the curriculum and employers. Here the majority felt that the needs of most learners could only be met if employers were satisfied, and that centrally designed curricula and qualifications were often insufficiently responsive to the latter:

Realistically for an employee to progress in his/her role there must be agreement between him/her and the employer to commit to college training. The risk for the employer is in transportable skills which may mean the loss of the employee because of greater employability. The catalyst for work-related training may be the employee's self-interest but the support of the employer is critical and the curriculum must have appeal to the employer.

Employers' needs change rapidly; colleges should have the ability to change just as quickly.

Over 18% of the recorded comments in response to Question 4 concerned the balance of national and local priorities. A number felt that the two were not mutually exclusive, and that greater flexibility in responding to the latter was a prerequisite of delivering on the former:

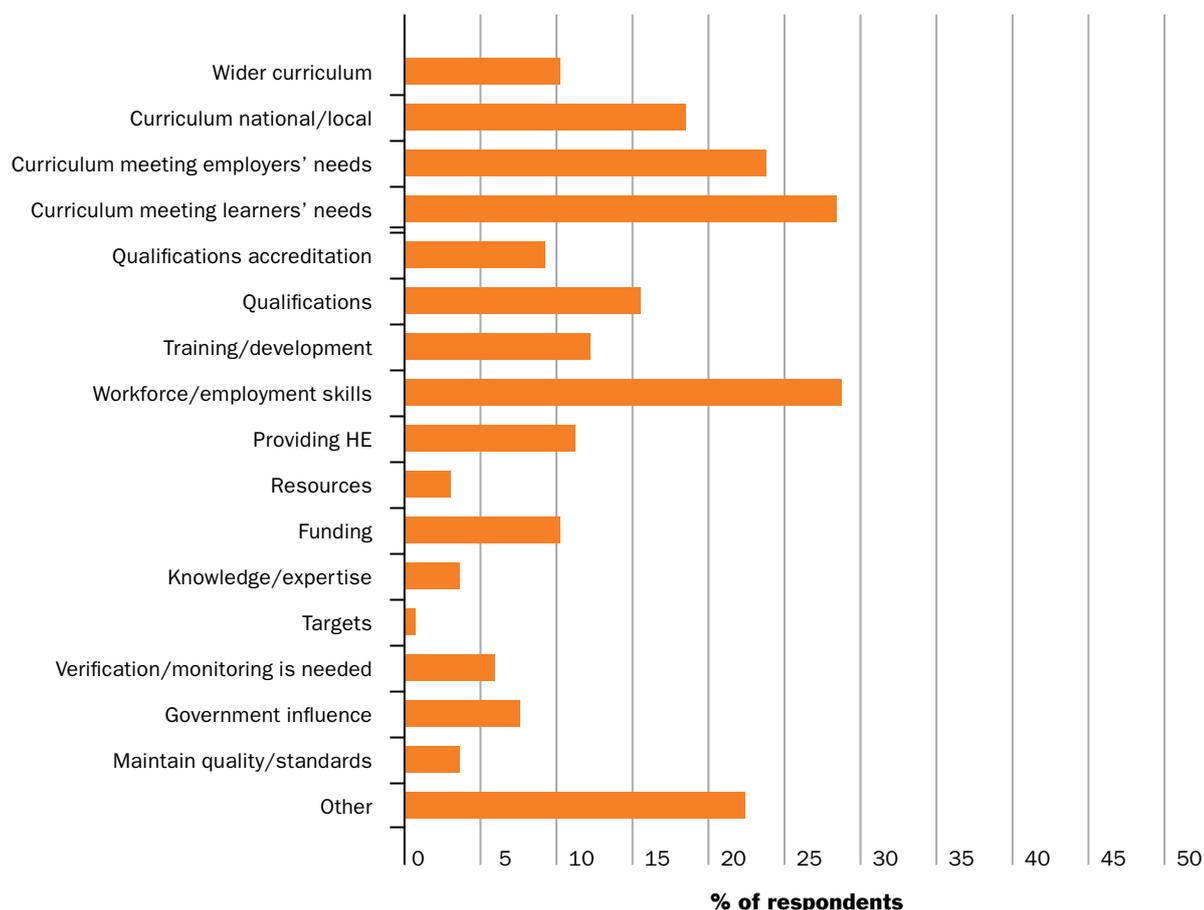
FE colleges must meet the needs of their local adult community and employers in the context of local, regional and national economic policies.

Others pointed out that:

Being too relevant to local needs is restrictive for learners who may relocate or be subject to fluctuations in local employment demand.

A full breakdown of the broad themes attracting comments relating to the first section of the questionnaire is provided in Figure 7.

Figure 7 Curriculum, qualifications and skills themes attracting written comments



(Based on comments from 303 respondents)

4.2 Funding

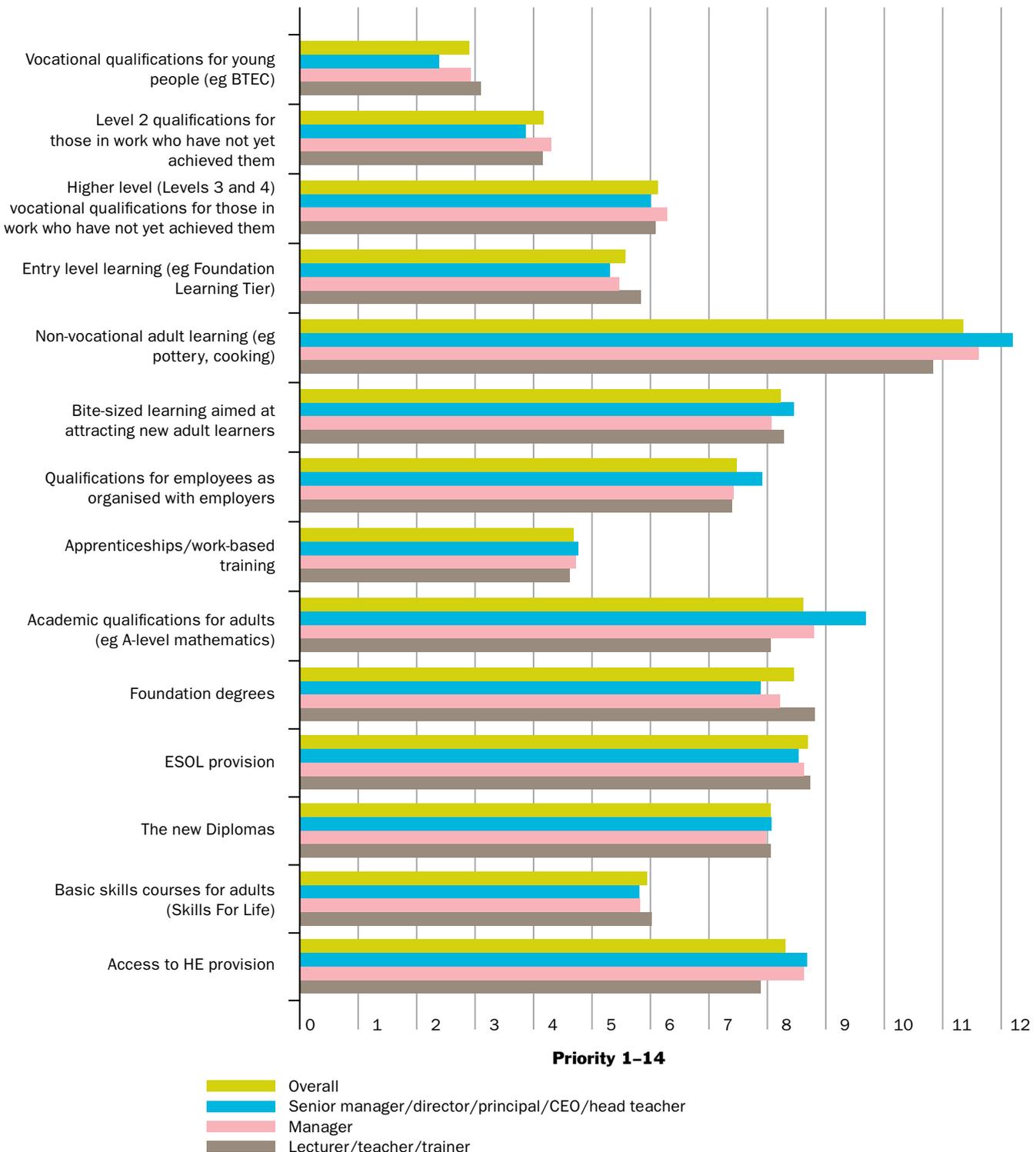
In this section of the questionnaire we asked survey participants to rank each of 14 areas of existing FE provision in order of priority for funding. The results were remarkable in two respects. First, in spite of the criticisms from within the sector that we have already noted, there appeared to be general agreement with the government's emphasis on funding priorities related to skills. The top three in terms of the average rankings recorded by participants were *vocational qualifications for young people; first time Level 2 qualifications; and Apprenticeships and other forms of work-based training*.

Second, there was a high level of consistency in the relative rankings recorded by the different grades of staff who participated. The vested interests of teaching staff might have suggested that there would be more variations in their own pattern of priorities. In fact, only in the case of *Access to HE provision; academic qualifications for adults; and non-vocational adult learning* did lecturers tend to record higher priority rankings than managerial staff, and even in these cases all fell in the bottom half of lecturers' own average rank orders (Figure 8).

More worrying for the government might be the middling priority ranking accorded to the new Diplomas, as FE’s contribution to their delivery is considered to be a vital element in their success. It may be, however, that this is merely a reflection of the fact that most colleges have yet to introduce them, and that a similar survey conducted a year or more onwards would produce a rather different reaction.

Figure 8 Rank order of funding priorities

Figure 8 displays the mean (average) rank order from 1–14, with the scale reversed so that the relative prominence given to each priority is reflected in the length of the bars alongside it.



Participants' views

Survey participants were given the opportunity to record funding priorities other than those identified specifically in our questionnaire. The further priority most commonly noted in response (by 18 respondents) was *A-levels and other academic qualifications for young people*. No other additional priority was mentioned by more than 10 survey participants.

Almost a quarter of respondents took the opportunity to record extra written comments concerning funding priorities. Far and away the most common were comments to the effect that none of those listed in the questionnaire were unimportant, and that they were therefore very difficult to prioritise meaningfully, respectively by 25% and 21% of those who responded to question 6. Any one of them might legitimately have the highest priority in the eyes of an individual learner. Equally, funding allocations needed to be sensitive and responsive to the different patterns of provision that stemmed from justifiable inter-institutional differences in mission.

I think all of these areas are important. If we want to promote equality of opportunity, shouldn't all the areas be adequately funded? I feel the current emphasis on 14–19 learners is beginning to hinder progression opportunities for adult learners.

This is a question that cannot be answered in the way allowed. One is not more important than another; they are all part of a complex mix of demands that will have local and institutional variation.

These are not mutually exclusive – a successful college needs elements of all, with the hope and expectation that learners can move between different areas and qualifications.

Hard to rank as I feel there should be an entitlement to all these in a well-organised and funded FE sector.

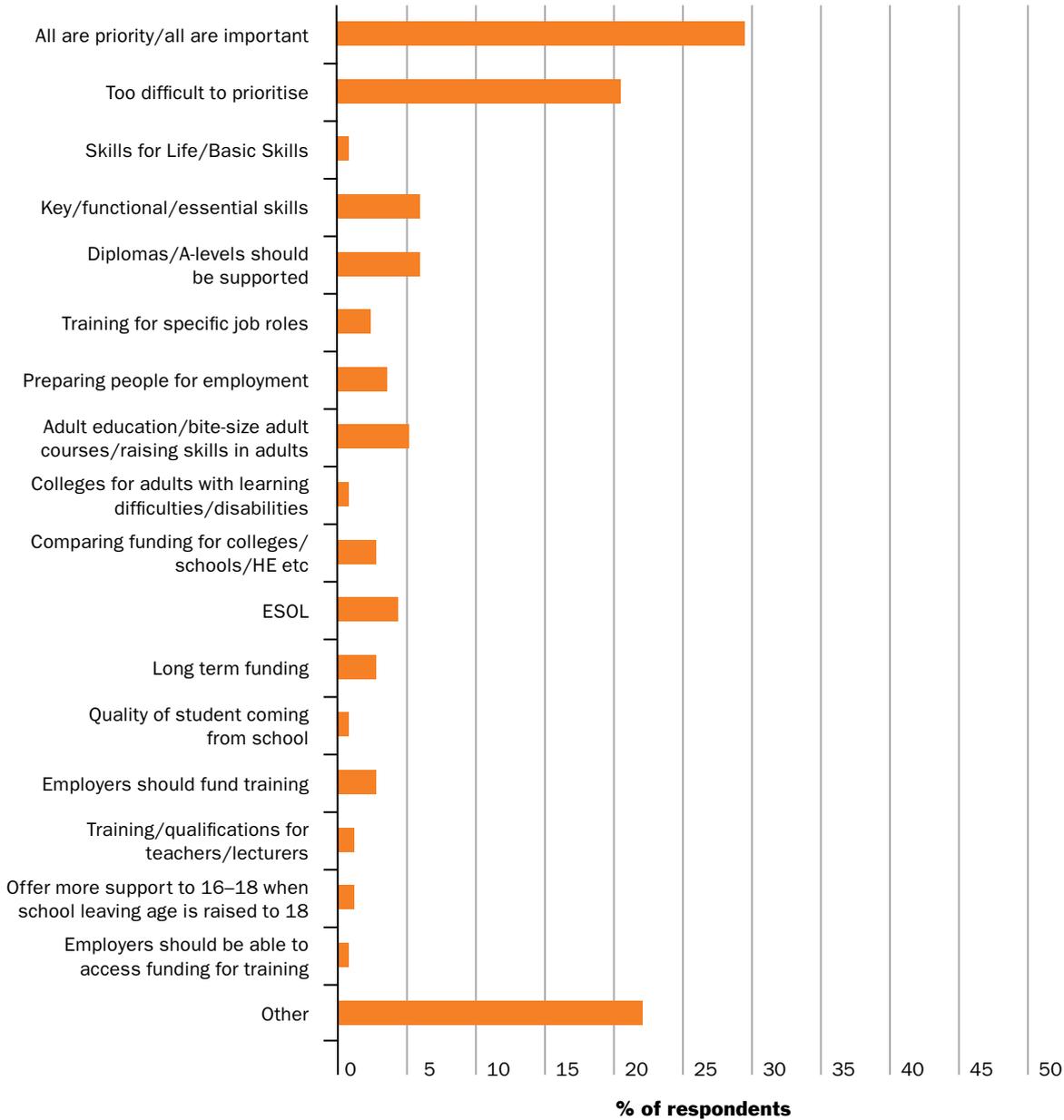
A further 6% of the responses argued that greater priority should be given to Skills for Life and Basic Skills:

Free literacy and numeracy courses should be available to any learner who has not yet achieved a Level 2 qualification in these subjects.

We need to ensure that learners have basic communication skills as these are not evident when learners leave school. Those without basic knowledge should have priority so that they can find work and those already in work should be our next priority.

A similar proportion made comments arguing that greater emphasis currently needed to be placed on funding the new Diplomas and/or A/AS levels, while slightly smaller numbers prioritised ‘bite-sized’ skills courses for adults, and provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Otherwise, no one aspect of funding was singled out for comment by 10 or more respondents. A full breakdown of the extra comments on funding recorded by survey participants is displayed in Figure 9.

Figure 9 Written comments concerning funding



(Based on comments from 249 respondents)

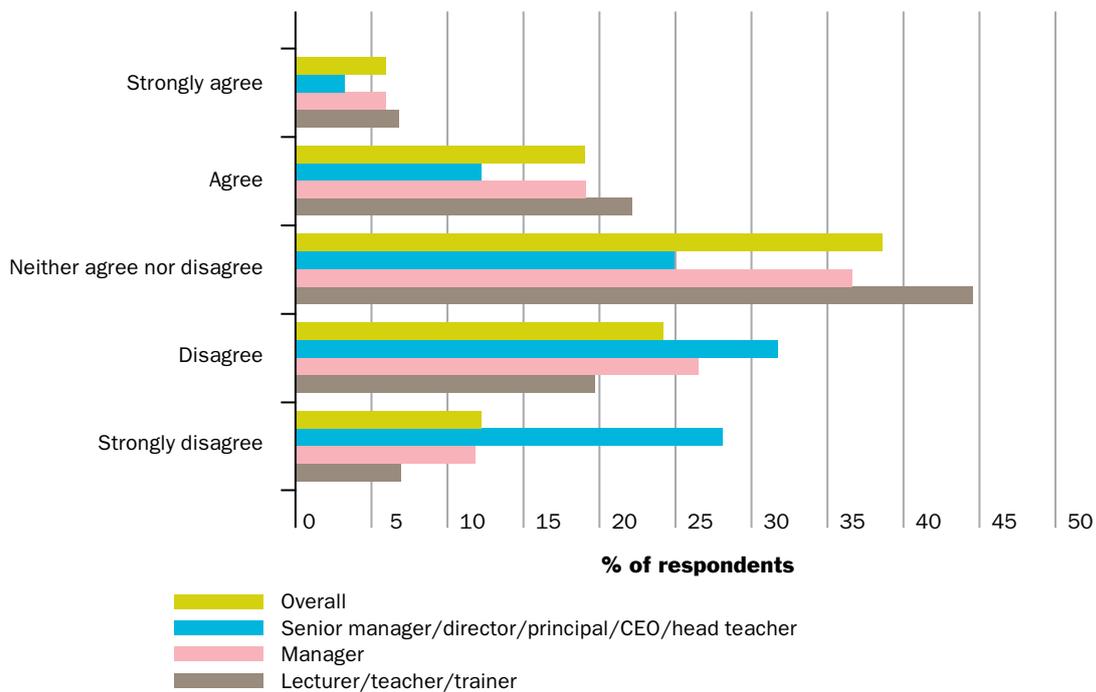
4.3 College structures and regulation

The third section of our survey questionnaire presented respondents with 10 statements concerning the structure and regulation of the sector, against which they were requested to indicate their strength of agreement. The questions related primarily to the specific direction of the current government reforms and their potential consequences for colleges.

Moving 14–19 funding to local authorities

The first of the statements under this section concerned whether or not the government’s proposal to move 14–19 funding to local authorities will lead to better outcomes for learners. Overall, almost 39% of survey participants took a neutral view on this issue, with the remainder slightly more inclined to disagree that it would benefit learners than to agree. Senior managers were more likely than other grades of staff to have a definite view on the issue, and to disagree – with almost half of them doing so. Conversely, almost 45% of lecturers expressed a neutral view, with the remainder split slightly in favour of agreement with the statement (Figure 10).

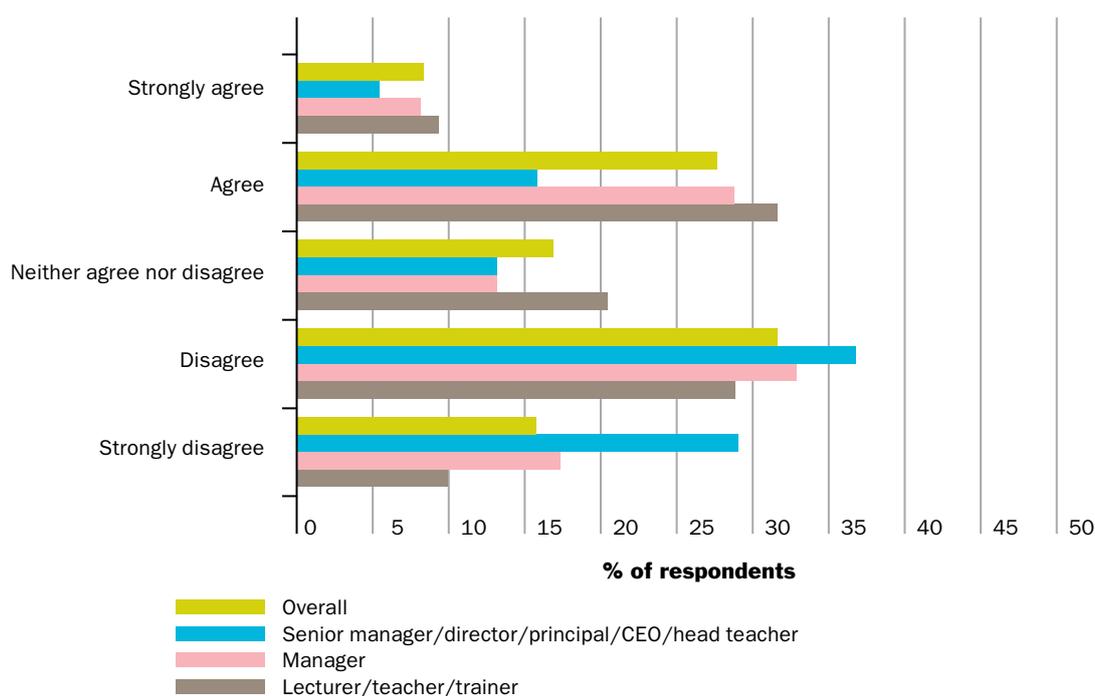
Figure 10 Moving 14–19 funding to local authorities from the LSC will lead to better outcomes for learners



Splitting the FE role at 19

The next statement in this section of our survey questionnaire concerned the splitting of the role of FE along pre-19 and post-19 lines. Opinion was substantially divided on this issue, with rather more respondents (47.3%) disagreeing that this should happen than agreeing (35.9%). There were also notable differences in view between the different grades of staff. Senior managers were most inclined to disagreement (65.7%), and least to agreement (21.2%). Conversely, a slightly larger proportion of lecturers agreed with a split of this type than disagreed (40.9% compared to 38.7%) (Figure 11).

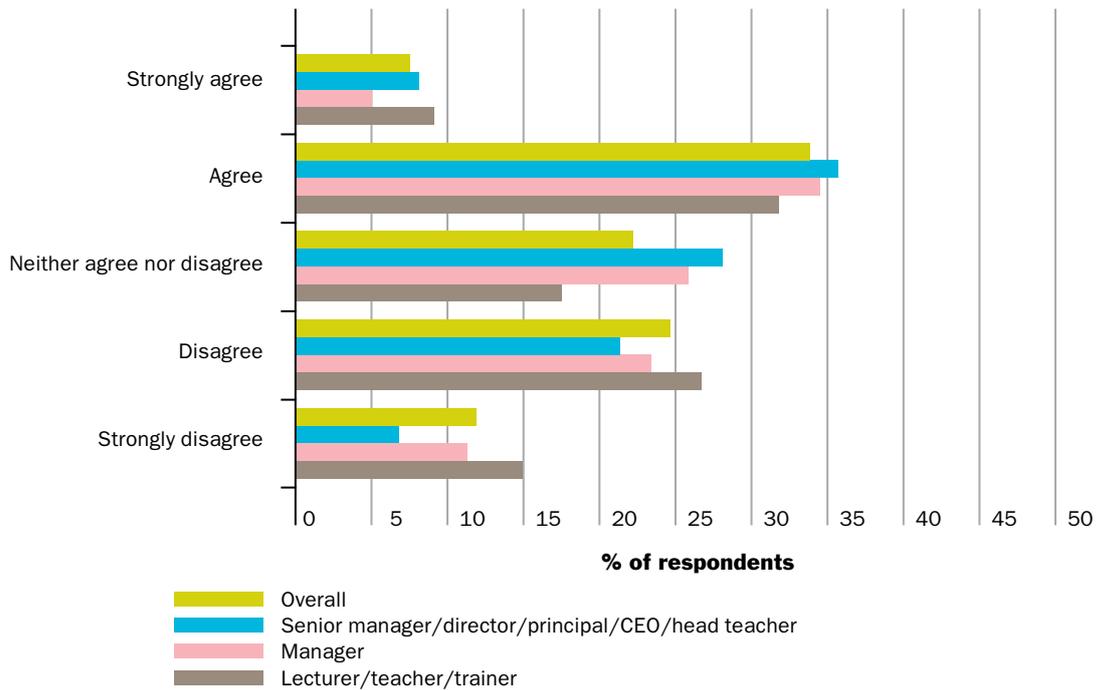
Figure 11 The role of FE should be formally split along pre-19 and post-19 lines



Will raising the leaving learning age help colleges?

Survey participants were then asked their opinion about whether or not the plan to raise the age for compulsory participation in learning from 16 to 18 would benefit colleges. Here again there were considerable differences in participants' perceptions. A slightly higher proportion of respondents agreed that this extension would be advantageous for colleges than disagreed (41.4% compared to 36.4%), though the numbers who strongly disagreed outweighed those who strongly agreed (11.9% compared with 7.5%). Lecturers were least likely to take a neutral stance on this issue, while senior managers were the most likely to agree, and least likely to dissent (Figure 12).

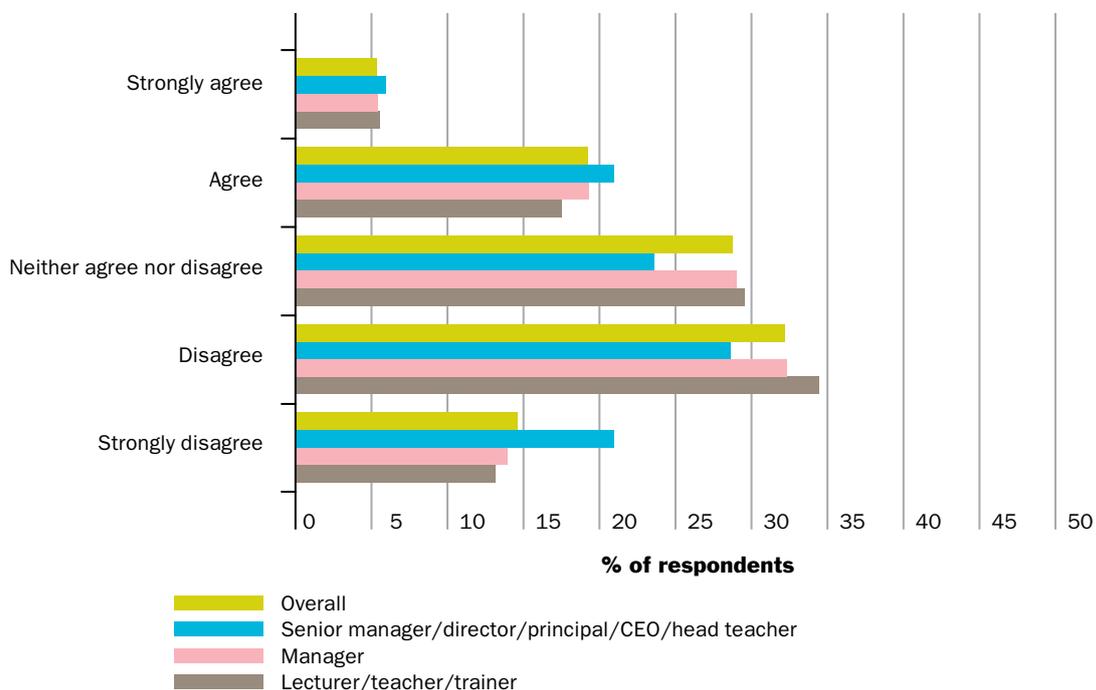
Figure 12 Raising the leaving learning age from 16 to 18 will be advantageous for colleges



Large vs small

The next issue on which survey participants were invited to express a view was whether or not larger colleges are better than smaller colleges at meeting the needs of those they aim to serve. The weight of opinion here was largely against this proposition (46.9%), though a significant minority (28.7%) took a neutral view (Figure 13).

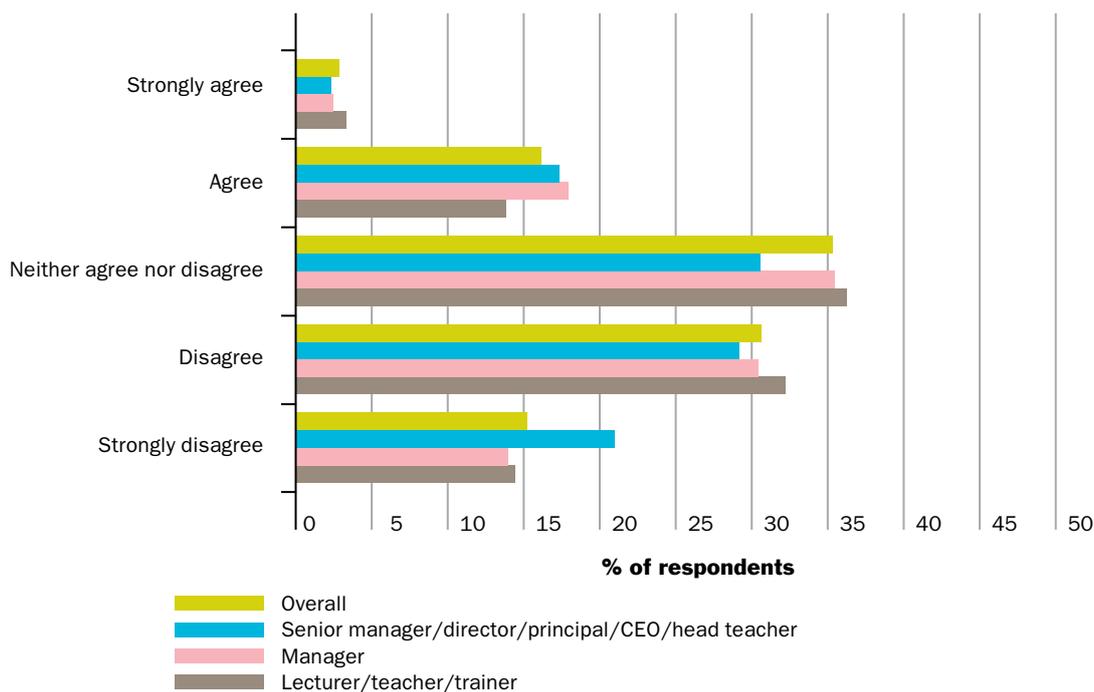
Figure 13 On the whole, larger colleges are better at meeting the needs of learners, employers and communities than smaller colleges



The benefits of college mergers

Respondents were then asked about college mergers, and whether or not they benefited learners and employers. Over a third expressed a neutral view on this question, but the remainder were split largely against the idea that mergers were advantageous to users of colleges (45.9%, compared to 18.9% who agreed that they were). There was relatively little difference in the spread of opinion according to grade of staff, with the exception that senior managers were rather more inclined than others to express strong disagreement (Figure 14).

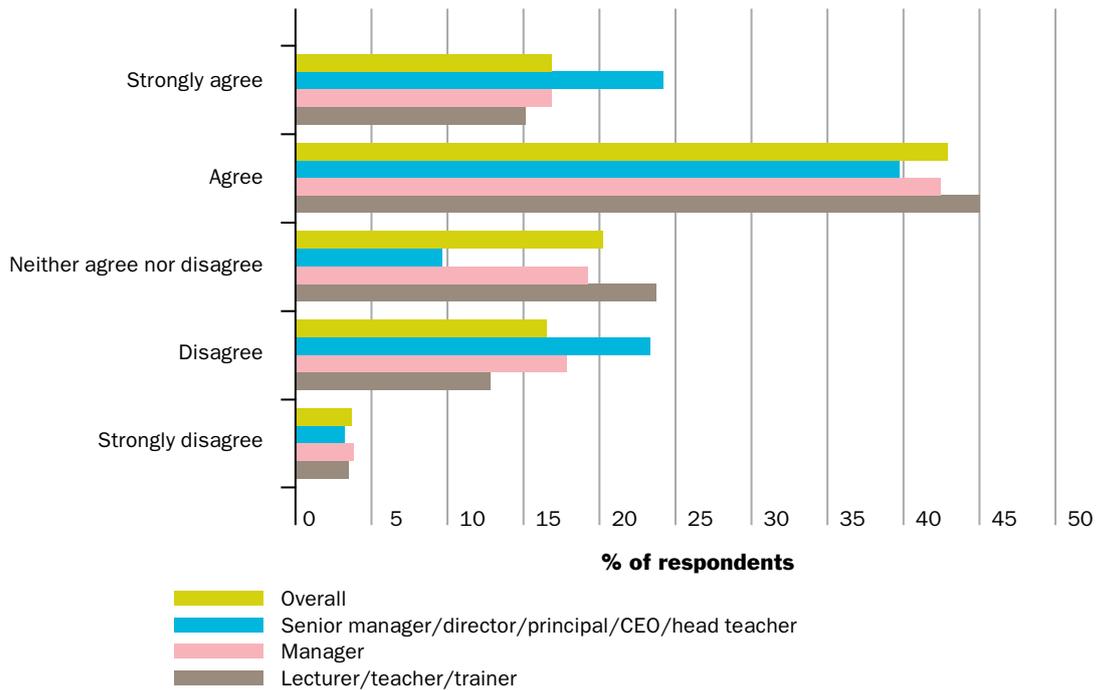
Figure 14 On the whole, college mergers benefit learners and employers



Self-regulation

Our survey then sought to explore the level of desire within FE for the increased self-regulation promised by government, by asking respondents if they felt that regulatory functions such as inspection should be put in the hands of the sector. Opinion was substantially in favour of this notion, with 59.7% expressing some measure of agreement, and 20.1% against. Senior managers were least inclined, and lecturers most inclined, to take a neutral view on the issue (Figure 15).

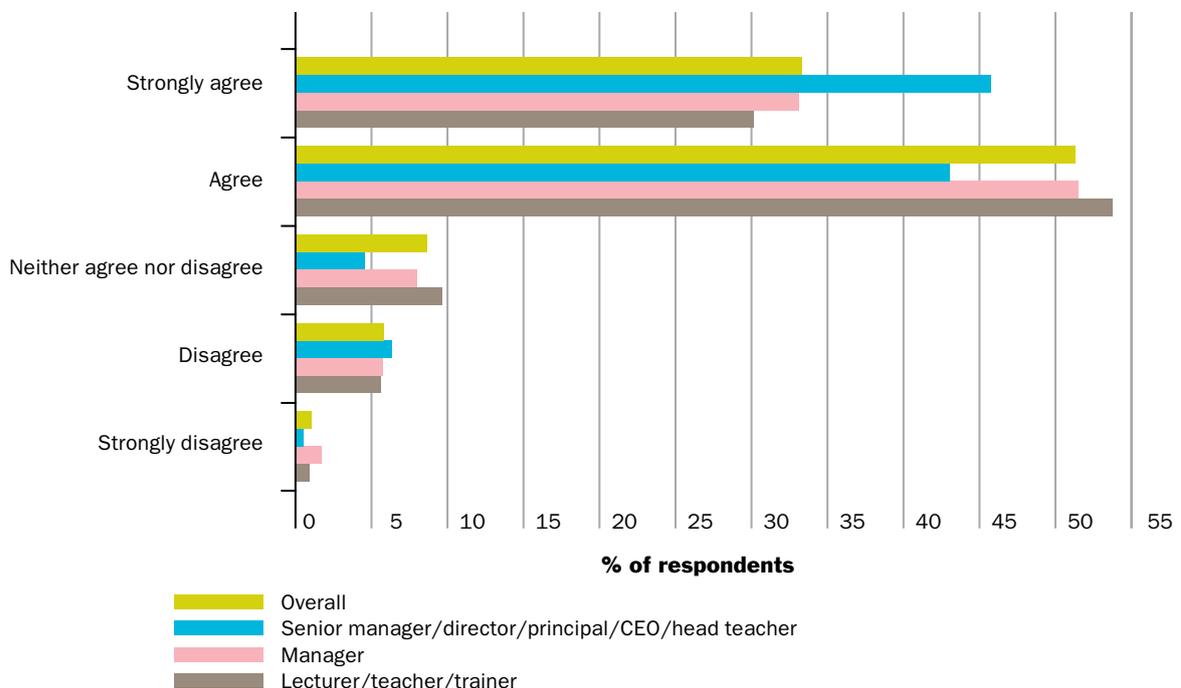
Figure 15 Regulatory functions, such as inspection, should be put in the hands of the sector



Funding for quality improvement

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was overwhelming support for the next statement on which we asked for an opinion – that funding for quality improvement should go directly to colleges, rather than being managed centrally. Some 84.6% of survey participants agreed with this proposition – 33.3% strongly so – and only 6.8% disagreed. Support for funding for quality improvement being channelled directly to colleges was strongest among senior managers (Figure 16).

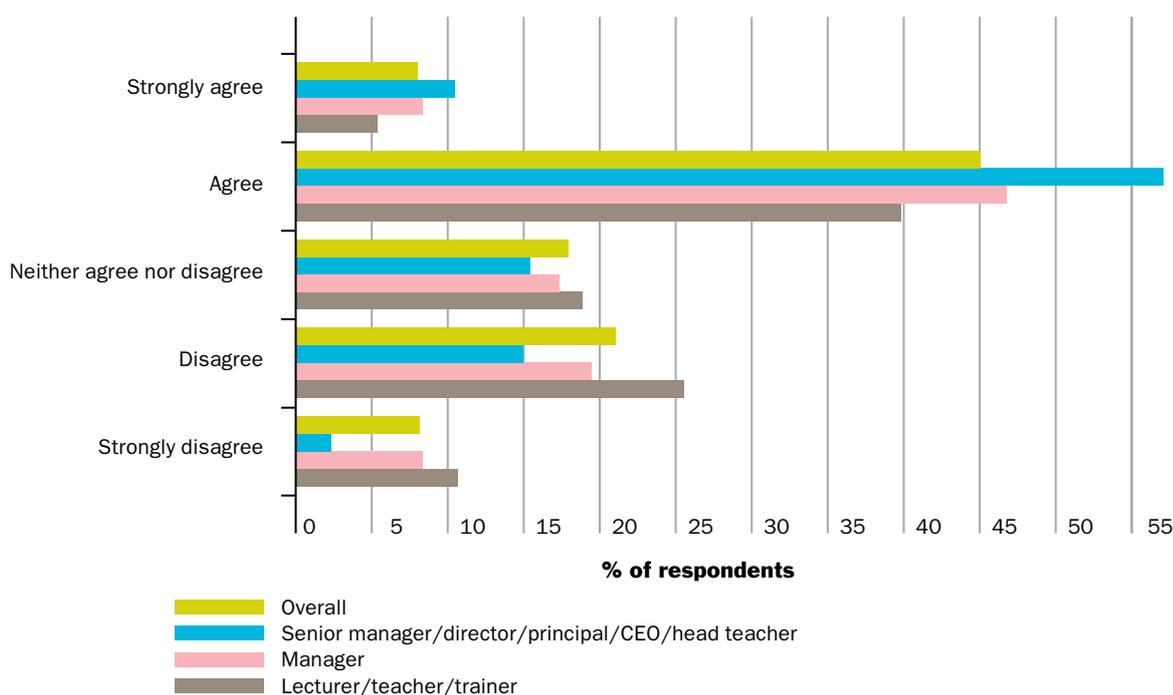
Figure 16 Money for quality improvement should go directly to colleges rather than be managed centrally



National targets

One of the past criticisms levelled at government policy for FE has been the claim that national targets imposed unfairly constrain colleges' freedom of action and, on occasion, produce perverse outcomes. It should therefore be reassuring to the government that most of the respondents to our survey (53.1%) agreed with our next statement – that colleges should be subject to national targets – compared with 29% who disagreed. Agreement was most likely among senior managers, and least likely among lecturers, though even among the latter a higher proportion supported the notion than opposed it (Figure 17).

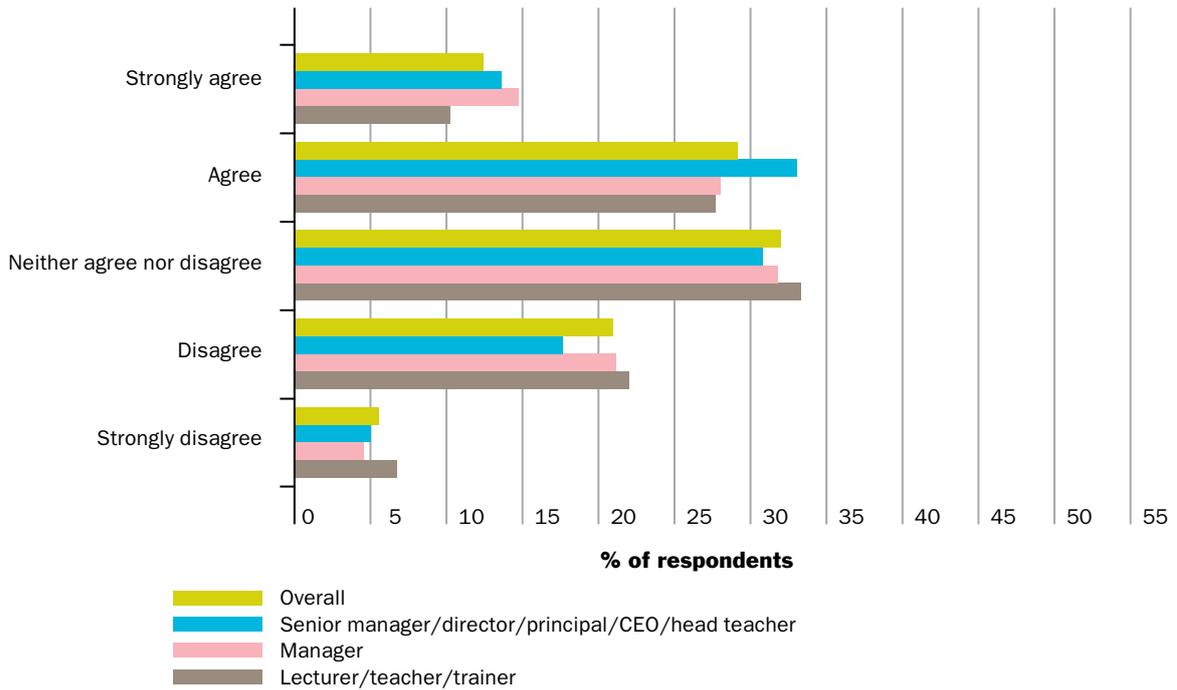
Figure 17 Colleges should be subject to national targets



Is the label 'further education' helpful?

Since the Foster report on the future of FE, and before, there has been considerable debate about the need for the sector to develop a clearer identity. Recent government changes, including in particular the split of the planning and funding of pre-19 and post-19 learning, pose the question of whether the title 'further education' itself is any longer meaningful. This issue was raised by the next statement in our survey questionnaire. Just under a third of respondents took a neutral view. The remainder were substantially split in their opinion, though somewhat more agreed that the term was no longer helpful than disagreed (41.6% compared to 26.4%). The spread of opinion on this issue was relatively consistent across all grades of staff (Figure 18).

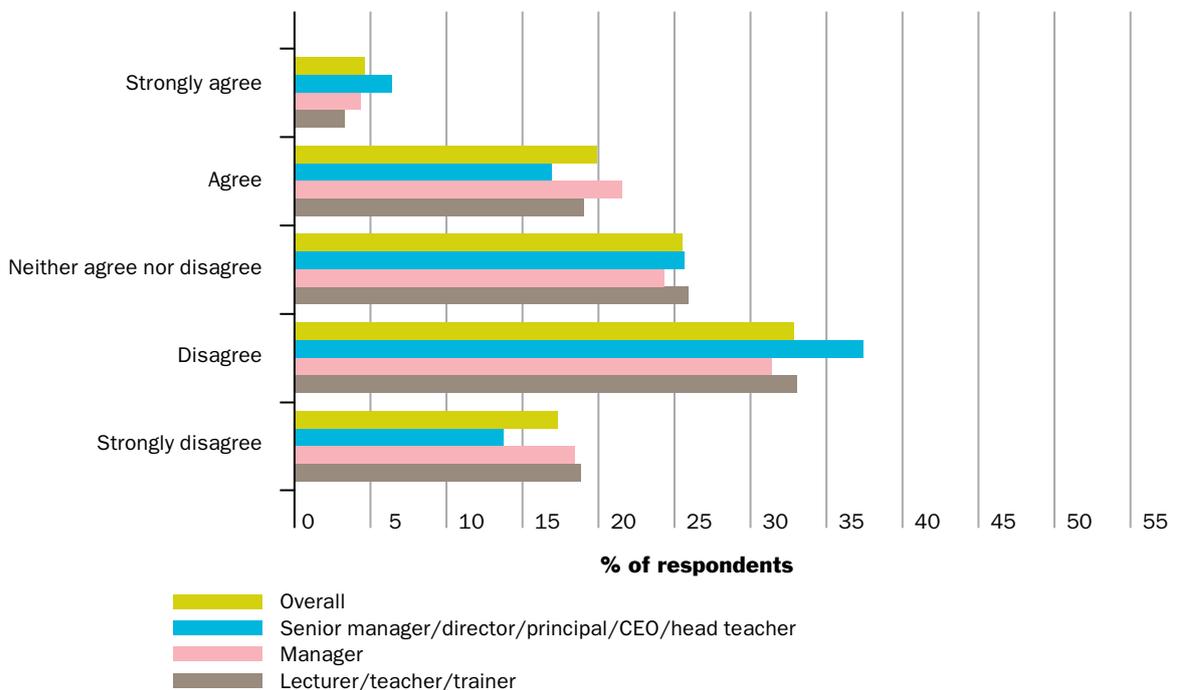
Figure 18 The label ‘further education’ is no longer helpful for colleges as they communicate to learners, communities and employers



The role of market forces

Not least of the concepts underpinning the government’s agenda for reform of public services are *choice* and *contestability* – the idea that provision should be led by the demands of users, and that entry barriers on the supply side should be minimised. The last statement in this section of our survey therefore sought reactions to the notion that colleges should be opened up to stronger market competition. Around half of the survey participants disagreed that this should occur, compared with just under a quarter who supported the idea, with the spread of views relatively consistent across the different grades (Figure 19).

Figure 19 Colleges should be opened up to stronger market competition



Participants' views

The additional comments made by survey participants in response to the invitation in question 8 at the end of this section reflected the wide differences in opinion that were apparent in the reactions to many of the statements, as reported above. Some agreed that there was an urgent need for greater clarity in college missions, and saw the government's reforms as an opportunity to realise it. Others worried that society would lose if the existing provision of general FE colleges (GFEs) that catered for all ages post-14 was fragmented. A number emphasised that they did not seek or expect colleges to be accorded specially protected status in the face of competition, but experience to date made them doubt that any extension of market forces would be based on a 'level playing field'.

The most common theme under which comments were recorded – by almost 27% of survey participants – concerned the competitive environment in which colleges operate. Here many considered that stronger market competition might well do more harm than good:

Market forces are a negative impact on the sector. We run what we can sell, not what is most useful to individuals. We should co-operate in the use of resources, too much is wasted in competing. Competition results in losers as well as winners. We need all our providers to be of a proper standard.

Competition and targets do not always improve quality – they can lead to corners being cut.

Others were not opposed to being further opened up to market forces, provided there was equal treatment for all providers:

Competition is fine so long as every provider is on a level playing field with regards to procedures to be followed by awarding bodies, inspection and auditors!

A minority took a more sanguine view, however:

Putting regulatory functions in the hands of the colleges would be like putting the cat in charge of the cream. Market competition is good as long as it does not lead to shortcuts and a drop in educational standards.

Over 18% of the comments recorded in response to question 8 related to targets. Here most responses indicated some degree of scepticism about their value, even while accepting their inevitability:

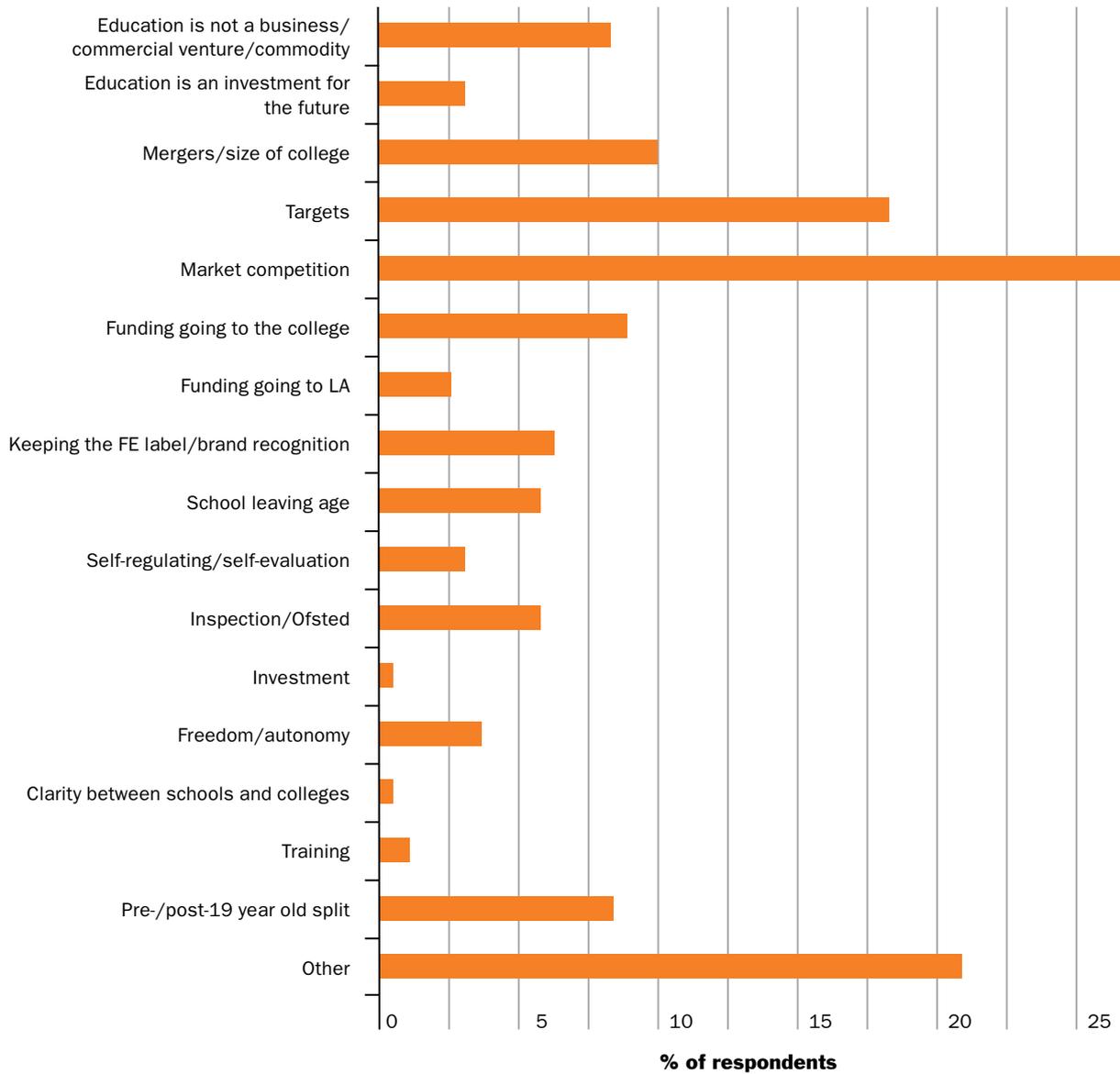
At the present time, the focus on funding and targets drives colleges to present the best data possible. Too much competition and an unhealthy focus on targets do nothing to support or aid improvements in the learning and teaching experience.

Some 10% of comments concerned mergers and the optimum size of colleges. Most of these queried any the assumptions implied in the statements listed under question 7 that large or merged colleges were more beneficial for either learners or employers:

Larger colleges can offer more variety, but they need strong management and excellent QA [quality assurance] systems in place. Merging colleges may not always benefit a community if access becomes a problem for the learners.

All other themes attracted comments from fewer than 10% of the survey participants who answered question 8. A full breakdown of responses is displayed in Figure 20.

Figure 20 College structures and regulation themes attracting written comments



(Based on comments from 191 respondents)

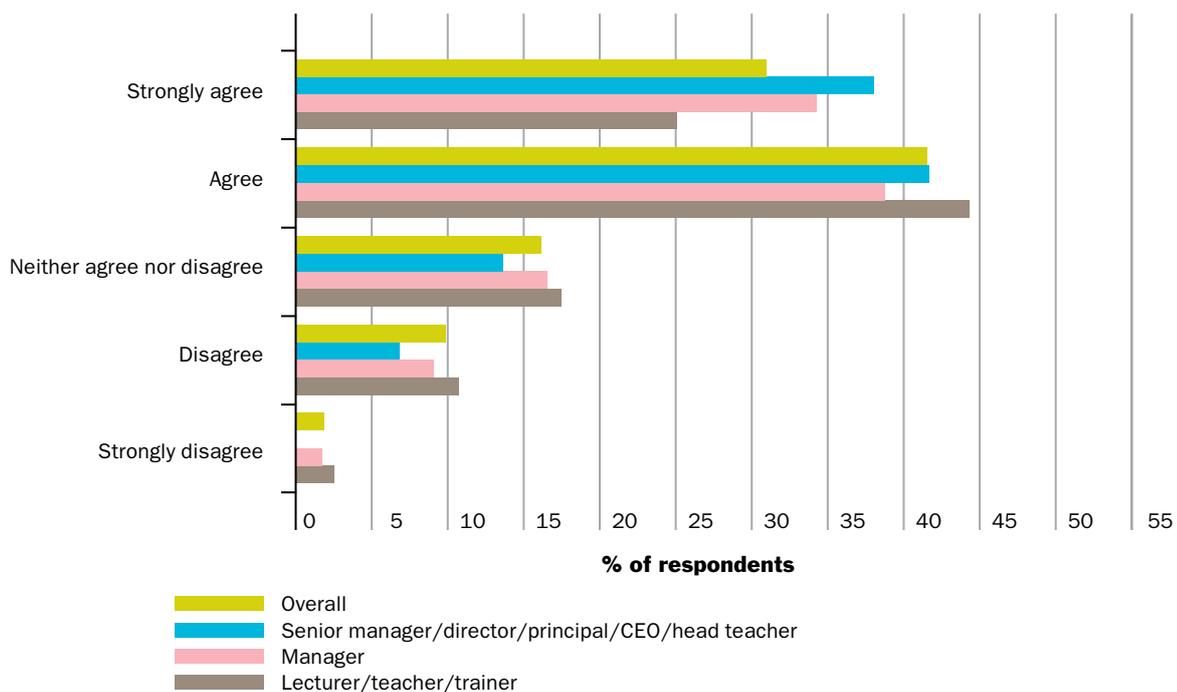
4.4 Seeking new staff for the FE sector

In the last main section of our survey questionnaire, we sought respondents' opinions on four statements concerning the capability of staffing in colleges and related issues of recruitment.

Recruiting more graduates?

The first of these raised the question of whether or not the recruitment of more high calibre graduates into careers in FE would benefit the sector. There was a large measure of agreement that this would be the case (72.4%), with only 11.6% recording any measure of disagreement. The spread of opinion on the issue across the different grades of staff was broadly consistent, though lecturers were slightly less likely than others to favour the idea (Figure 21).

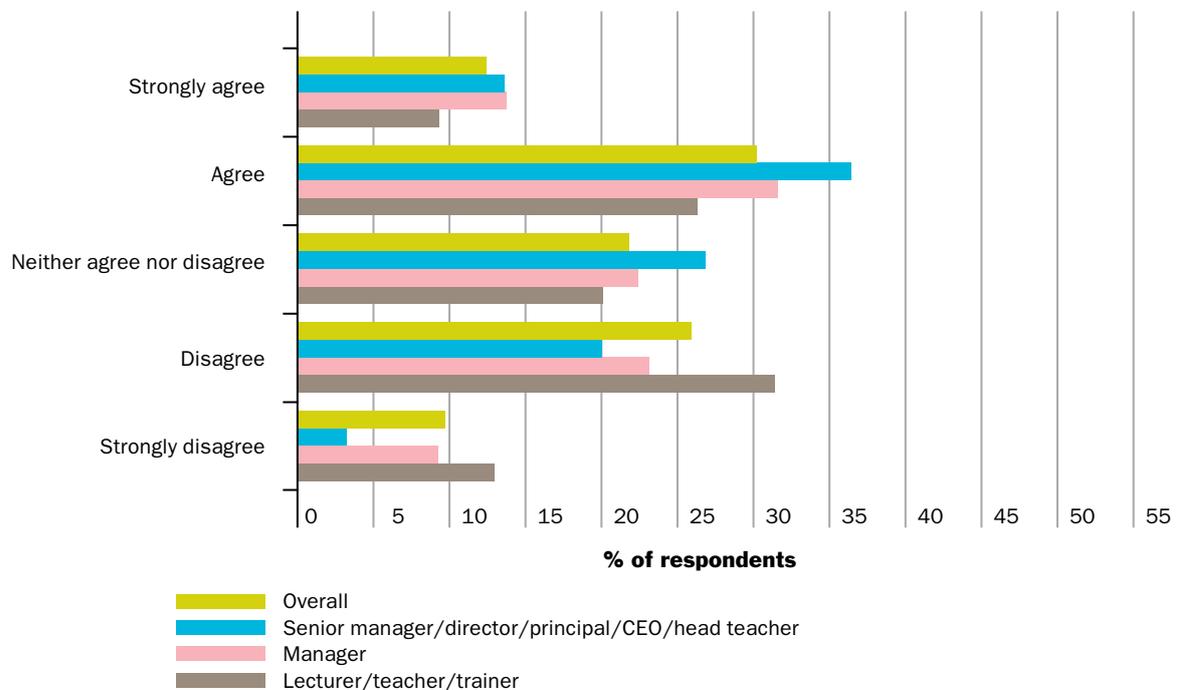
Figure 21 Recruiting more high-calibre graduates into FE careers will benefit the sector (eg benefits to learners, help improve standards, etc)



Attracting managers from business

Another feature of the government's agenda for reform of public services has been the suggestion that providers could benefit their users by learning more from best practice within business. Our next statement was therefore aimed at checking attitudes within the sector to recruiting more managers from business into college management. Here opinion was much more divided, with almost as many respondents opposing the idea (35.6%) as supporting it (42.6%). Agreement levels were notably higher among managerial staff – especially senior managers – perhaps reflecting the presence of a number of respondents who had already followed this route. Conversely, more lecturers opposed this trend than supported it (44.3% compared to 35.6%) (Figure 22).

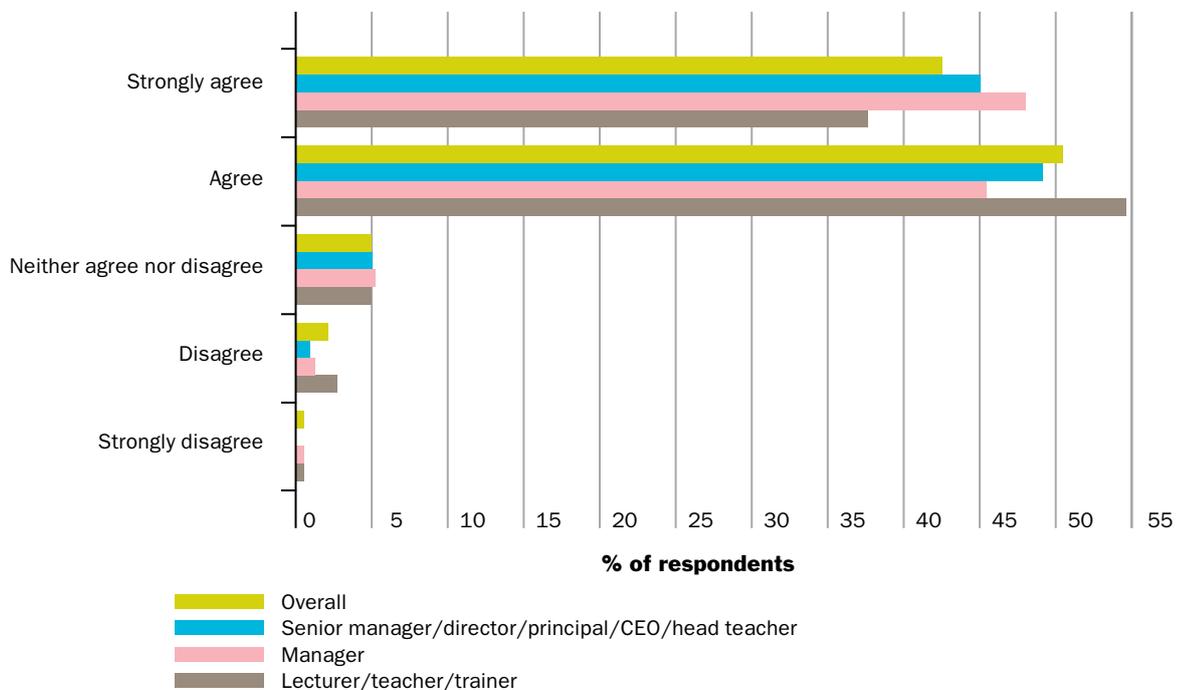
Figure 22 Recruiting more managers from business into college management teams will benefit the sector (eg benefits to learners, help improve standards, etc)



Recruiting vocational specialists

By way of contrast, our next statement drew the greatest level of support of any in our survey. It related to the benefit accruing to the sector from the recruitment of more highly skilled vocational specialists. Some 92.9% of survey participants agreed that such a step would be advantageous, and only 2.3% disagreed, a pattern of response that was generally consistent across all grades of staff (Figure 23). The relative unanimity of opinion on this issue ought to raise concerns among policy-makers. Although it indicates a welcome absence of complacency in the sector about its capacity to respond to the skills needs of the labour market, it also suggests that major challenges lie ahead if it is to succeed in doing so.

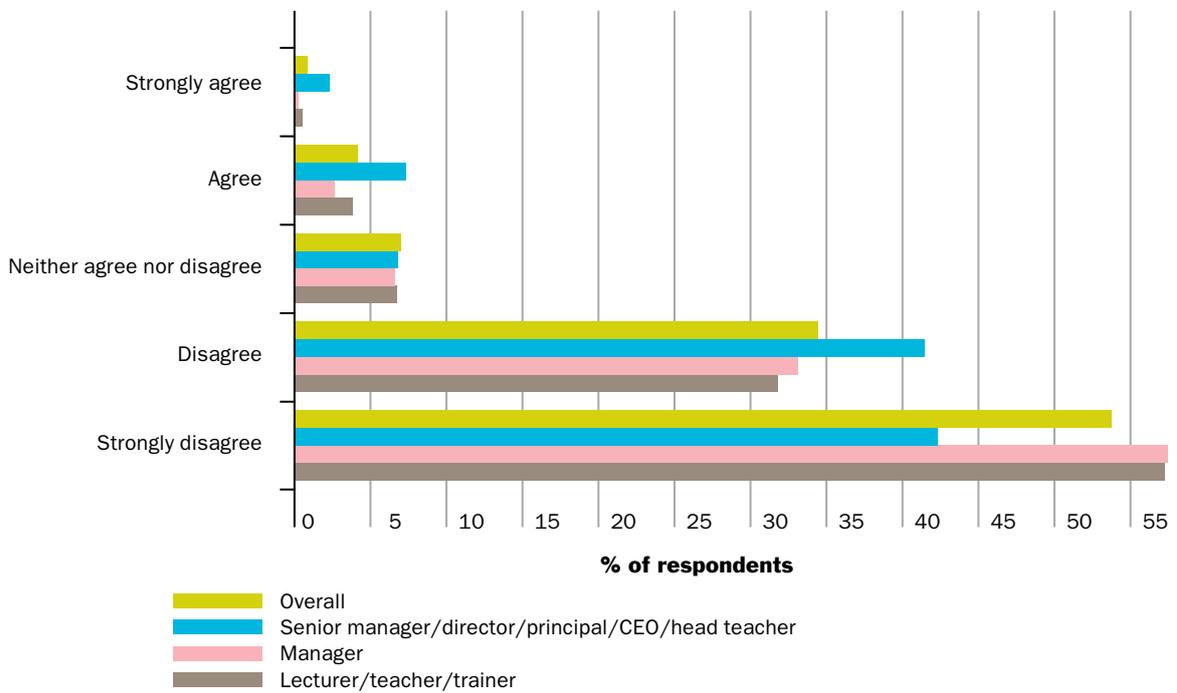
Figure 23 Recruiting more highly skilled vocational specialists into FE careers will benefit the sector (eg benefits to learners, help improve standards, etc)



Pay and conditions

We then checked the extent to which respondents considered that FE-sector pay and conditions are suitable for attracting talented people. Here again, we encountered substantial consistency in the response – the large majority (88.1%) expressing disagreement on this occasion, and only 4.9% agreeing, with little difference according to grade, although senior managers were slightly less inclined to dissent than other grades (Figure 24). This reaction serves to reinforce the need for policy-makers to take account of the views reported above concerning the desirability of recruiting more highly skilled vocational specialists.

Figure 24 FE-sector pay and conditions are suitable for attracting talented people



Participants' views

The additional comments made by 262 (21%) of survey participants in response to the request to do so at the end of this section of the questionnaire emphasised the strength of opinion apparent in the reaction to the last two statements, as reported above. Well over half of those who commented took the view that salary levels for teaching staff in FE were not competitive with schools or business, though in the latter case the problem was felt to be notably more acute in the south of England than in the north. A number were also of the opinion that teaching skills were as important as vocational specialism, if not more so, but that individuals in possession of such skills were not necessarily any easier to recruit:

Current salaries are not attractive to science, engineering and technology specialists and as such we have great difficulty in filling these posts with suitably qualified staff. This leads to being unable to satisfy the demand for courses in these areas and therefore an underskilled workforce. There needs to be some mechanism by which we can offer higher remuneration in these areas.

The pay for FE college lecturers is not bad, but it cannot compete with the private sector. Why should a plumber or a musician work for £20–£30 per hour as a lecturer when they can earn twice or three times that in the profession?

In some occupational areas and parts of the country pay is reasonable. However, in the south and in certain professions the pay will not attract the right calibre of staff.

I employ many staff who have a passion for teaching and learning, and in my experience the sector is totally reliant on them. With an ageing workforce, attracting younger able people into the sector is virtually impossible. We are increasingly competing with schools, and my fear is that my best staff will leave for higher pay in schools, and they are very difficult people to replace. I manage an area that includes engineering and construction.

Just over 18% of survey participants recorded written comments in response to question 10 concerning the quality and standard of management in the sector. Most of these expressed some degree of scepticism that the recruitment of more managers from business would benefit the sector:

I would urge extreme caution in recruiting managers from outside the sector. As principal of a GFE that was rated in quality and financial terms as one of the worst in the sector four years ago, I have had a very tough job turning around a situation that was created simply as a result of the lack of FE knowledge and experience of the previous senior management team.

More robust management training for experienced FE practitioners is, in my view, more likely to lead to improvement of standards than importing business managers with no background knowledge of FE.

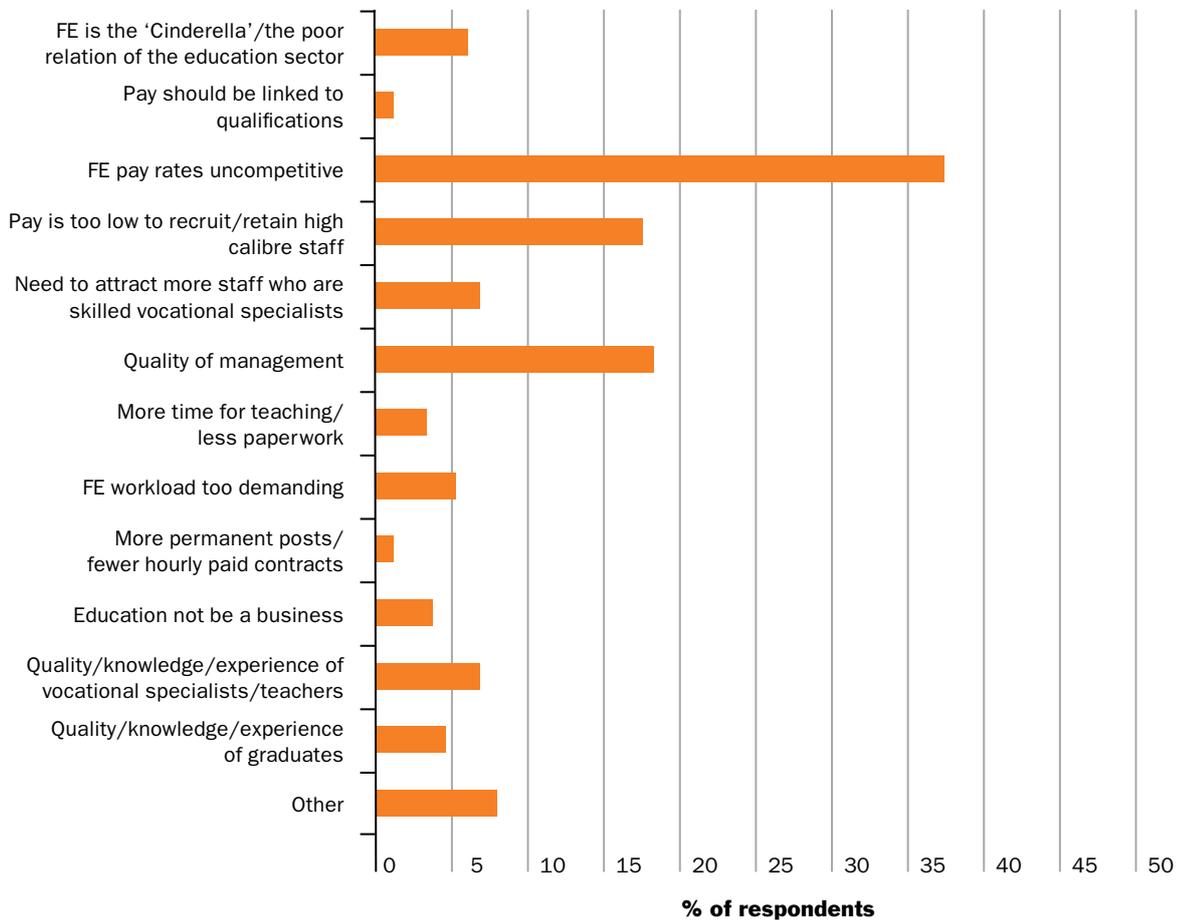
A minority, however, took a more positive, albeit qualified, view about the injection of managerial talent from outside FE:

There should be a good balance in college management between people from a business background and those who understand education and the way courses and funding change from one year to the next like ever-shifting sand.

I agree about attracting managers and vocational specialists but they do need to understand the sector properly and if they are teaching, to be properly trained.

No other aspect of FE staffing attracted comments from 10% or more of those who responded to question 10. A full breakdown of the areas commented on is displayed in Figure 25.

Figure 25 Written comments concerning staffing the FE sector



(Based on comments from 262 respondents)

5 Conclusions

The future direction of FE is too complex a subject to be captured in a straightforward questionnaire survey, as a number of those who participated pointed out in their comments. Nonetheless, the results reveal a number of striking features.

First, there is no consensus on a number of the key questions that face the sector. Opinion is substantially divided over the transfer of 14–19 funding to local authorities, the formal split of FE along pre-19 and post-19 lines, the raising of the leaving learning age and whether or not ‘further education’ is any longer a helpful label for colleges. And though there is majority disagreement that larger colleges give a better service, and that mergers are beneficial, there are significant minorities who agree with these propositions. No doubt this picture is a reflection of the diversity of the sector in terms of type of establishment and those they seek to cater for, both between and within colleges.

In other areas, however, there does appear to be general consistency in opinion. There is generally strong agreement that colleges should have the freedom to develop curricula and qualifications tailored to the needs of local businesses, that they are well placed to offer HE courses, and that money for quality improvement should be allocated to them directly rather than being managed centrally. Substantial majorities among all grades also agree that the curriculum should reflect an even mix of national and local priorities, and employer and learner needs, rather than be biased towards one or the other. There is general support for the recruitment of more high-calibre graduates and, in particular, more vocational specialists. Given the absence of complacency about the capabilities of FE that this suggests, policy-makers would do well to take note that there is also overwhelming disagreement that current pay and conditions within the sector are appropriate to attract talented individuals.

Generally speaking, there is less difference in opinion according to the grade of staff who responded than we might have anticipated, given the different perspectives involved. Senior managers are relatively more likely to welcome the prospect of greater autonomy for FE in the form of taking on extra commitments such as accrediting their own qualifications. They are also more likely to oppose the formal split of FE at 19 and the moving of 14–19 funding to local authorities, whereas lecturers are relatively more inclined to be neutral on these issues, or to agree. Conversely, lecturers are notably less favourable towards the idea of recruiting more managers from business than senior managers or managers.

The most remarkable instance of general consistency in opinion across the different grades of staff is the almost identical average rank ordering of funding priorities that emerged from the responses to our survey. Perhaps even more notable is the fact that on this evidence the priorities of the sector are largely in line with those of government in terms of the relative emphasis on adult skills as opposed to non-vocational learning. Here, though, the accompanying comments recorded by survey participants suggest the need for caution before interpreting this pattern of response as any ringing endorsement of current policies. For one thing, they suggest that all our listed funding priorities would score highly for importance, and that the rank orders chosen therefore involve only fine divisions between each of them. For another, agreement with governmental funding priorities does not preclude criticism of their translation into actual allocations, and the resulting impact on different areas of provision.

Appendix 1 Survey questionnaire

Future of the FE sector survey

At the AoC conference in November 2007, John Denham, Secretary of State for Education, announced that the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) will be consulting on the future of the further education (FE) sector. Working in partnership with the Learning and Skills Network (LSN), the *Guardian* newspaper would like your views on what colleges of the future should look like for a major forthcoming feature.

The survey should take approximately 5 minutes to complete. All your answers will be treated in strict confidence by the research team and will not be attributed to you in any way.

For any queries regarding this survey, please email:
surveysresearch@lsneducation.org.uk.

Thank you for your participation.

Curriculum, qualifications and skills

Q1 Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

- colleges should be able to accredit their own qualifications
- colleges are well placed to offer higher education courses (eg degrees)
- colleges should be allowed to develop curriculum and qualifications that fit the specific needs of local businesses
- the number and level of qualifications held by the workforce is a good measure of the economy's skill levels

Options:

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Q2 To what degree should college curriculum reflect national or local priorities?

Options:

Entirely local

Mainly local

An even mix

Mainly national

Entirely national

Q3 The curriculum of a college should reflect the needs of employers or the demands of learners.

Options:

Entirely employer

Mainly employer

An even mix

Mainly learner

Entirely learner

Q4 Please use the space below to provide any additional comments in relation to this section.

Funding

Q5 Please rank the following in the order in which you believe they should be a priority for funding (Score the highest priority 1, the next highest 2, and so on).

- Vocational qualifications for young people (eg BTEC)
- Level 2 qualifications for those in work who have not yet achieved them
- Higher level (Levels 3 and 4) vocational qualifications for those in work who have not yet achieved them
- Entry level learning (eg Foundation Learning Tier)
- Non-vocational adult learning (eg pottery, cooking)
- Bite-sized learning aimed at attracting new adult learners
- Qualifications for employees as organised with employers
- Apprenticeships/ work-based training
- Academic qualifications for adults (eg A-level mathematics)
- Foundation degrees
- ESOL provision
- The new Diplomas
- Basic skills courses for adults (Skills For Life)
- Access to HE provision

Please describe any other priorities that are not listed above.

Q6 Please use the space below to provide any additional comments in relation to this section.

College structures and regulation

Q7 Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

- Moving 14–19 funding to local authorities from the LSC will lead to better outcomes for learners
- The role of FE should be formally split along pre-19 and post-19 lines
- Raising the leaving learning age from 16 to 18 will be advantageous for colleges
- On the whole, larger colleges are better at meeting the needs of learners, employers and communities than smaller colleges
- On the whole, college mergers benefit learners and employers
- Regulatory functions, such as inspection, should be put in the hands of the sector
- Money for quality improvement should go directly to colleges rather than be managed centrally
- Colleges should be subject to national targets
- The label ‘further education’ is no longer helpful for colleges as they communicate to learners, communities and employers
- Colleges should be opened up to stronger market competition

Options:

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Q8 Please use the space below to provide any additional comments in relation to this section.

Seeking new staff for the FE sector

Q9 Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

- Recruiting more high-calibre graduates into FE careers will benefit the sector (eg benefits to learners, help improve standards, etc)
- Recruiting more managers from business into college management teams will benefit the sector (eg benefits to learners, help improve standards, etc)

- Recruiting more highly skilled vocational specialists into FE careers will benefit the sector (eg benefits to learners, help improve standards, etc)
- FE sector pay and conditions are suitable for attracting talented people

Options:

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Q10 Please use the space below to provide any additional comments in relation to this section.

About you

Q11 Gender:

- Male
- Female

Q12 Age:

- Under 30
- 31–44 years
- 45–59 years
- 60 years +

Q13 Role:

- Lecturer/teacher/trainer
- Manager
- Senior manager/director
- Principal/CEO/head teacher
- Other – please specify

Thank you for completing this survey, your time is much appreciated.

Appendix 2 Tabulation of responses to questionnaire

Curriculum, qualifications and skills

Q1 Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Colleges should be able to accredit their own qualifications

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	86 (15.7%)	192 (35.0%)	87 (15.8%)	129 (23.5%)	55 (10.0%)
Manager	102 (24.1%)	152 (35.8%)	46 (10.8%)	106 (25.0%)	18 (4.2%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	66 (29.9%)	81 (36.7%)	28 (12.7%)	37 (16.7%)	9 (4.1%)
Other	6 (8.16%)	28 (37.8%)	9 (12.2%)	22 (29.7%)	9 (12.2%)
Overall	260 (20.5%)	453 (35.7%)	170 (13.4%)	294 (23.2%)	91 (7.2%)

Colleges are well placed to offer higher education courses (eg degrees)

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	126 (22.9%)	244 (44.3%)	75 (13.6%)	90 (16.3%)	16 (2.9%)
Manager	136 (32.1%)	185 (43.6%)	43 (10.1%)	52 (12.3%)	8 (1.9%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	90 (40.7%)	96 (43.4%)	19 (8.6%)	16 (7.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Other	12 (16.2%)	37 (50%)	9 (12.2%)	12 (13.4%)	4 (5.4%)
Overall	364 (28.7%)	562 (44.3%)	146 (11.5%)	170 (13.4%)	28 (2.2%)

Colleges should be allowed to develop curriculum and qualifications that fit the specific needs of local businesses

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/Teacher /Trainer	269 (48.9%)	230 (41.8%)	21 (3.8%)	23 (4.2%)	7 (1.3%)
Manager	247 (58.8%)	143 (34.0%)	18 (4.3%)	9 (2.1%)	3 (0.7%)
Senior Manager/Director/Principal CEO/Head teacher	148 (67.3%)	64 (29.1%)	3 (1.4%)	5 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Other	37 (50%)	33 (44.6%)	3 (4.1%)	1 (1.4%)	0 (0%)
Overall	701 (55.5%)	470 (37.2%)	45 (3.6%)	38 (3.0%)	10 (0.8%)

The number and level of qualifications held by the workforce is a good measure of the economy's skill levels

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	88 (16.4%)	225 (42.0%)	103 (19.2%)	107 (20.0%)	13 (2.4%)
Manager	53 (12.8%)	206 (49.8%)	66 (15.9%)	81 (19.6%)	8 (1.9%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	34 (15.5%)	104 (47.5%)	42 (19.2%)	32 (14.6%)	7 (3.2%)
Other	8 (10.8%)	34 (45.9%)	17 (23.0%)	11 (14.9%)	4 (5.4%)
Overall	183 (14.7%)	569 (45.8%)	228 (18.3%)	231 (18.6%)	32 (2.6%)

Q2 To what degree should college curriculum reflect national or local priorities?

Grade of respondent	Entirely local	Mainly local	An even mix	Mainly national	Entirely national
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	1 (0.2%)	91 (16.5%)	408 (73.8%)	50 (9.0%)	3 (0.5%)
Manager	3 (0.7%)	81 (19.1%)	306 (72.3%)	30 (7.1%)	3 (0.7%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	0 (0.0%)	39 (17.6%)	160 (72.4%)	19 (8.6%)	3 (1.4%)
Other	0 (0.0%)	12 (16.2%)	61 (82.4%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.4%)
Overall	4 (0.3%)	223 (17.5%)	935 (73.6%)	99 (7.8%)	10 (0.8%)

Q3 The curriculum of a college should reflect the needs of...

Grade of respondent	Entirely local	Mainly local	An even mix	Mainly national	Entirely national
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	4 (0.7%)	56 (10.1%)	392 (70.9%)	92 (16.6%)	9 (1.6%)
Manager	4 (0.9%)	66 (15.6%)	288 (68.2%)	61 (14.5%)	3 (0.7%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	2 (0.9%)	21 (9.5%)	160 (72.4%)	36 (16.3%)	2 (0.9%)
Other	0 (0%)	12 (16.2%)	61 (82.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.4%)
Overall	11 (0.9%)	152 (12.0%)	890 (70.1%)	202 (15.9%)	15 (1.2%)

Q4 Please use the space below to provide any additional comments in relation to this section.

Topics	No.	%
Wider curriculum	31	10.2
Curriculum national/local	56	18.5
Curriculum meeting employers' needs	72	23.8
Curriculum meeting learners' needs	86	28.4
Qualifications accreditation	28	9.2
Qualifications	47	15.5
Training/development	37	12.2
Workforce/employment skills	87	28.7
Providing HE	34	11.2
Resources	9	3.0
Funding	31	10.2
Knowledge/expertise	11	3.6
Targets	2	0.7
Verification/monitoring is needed	18	5.9
Government influence	23	7.6
Maintain quality/standards	11	3.6
Other	68	22.4

(Based on comments from 303 respondents. Percentages add up to more than 100% as some respondents recorded comments on more than one topic).

Funding

Q5 Please rank the following in the order in which you believe they should be a priority for funding.

Funding priority	Mean ratings		
	Lecturer	Manager	Senior Manager
Vocational qualifications for young people (eg BTEC)	3.09	2.91	2.37
Level 2 qualifications for those in work who have not yet achieved them	4.15	4.29	3.86
Higher level (Levels 3 and 4) vocational qualifications for those in work who have not yet achieved them	6.07	6.27	6.00
Entry level learning (eg Foundation Learning Tier)	5.83	5.46	5.30
Non-vocational adult learning (eg pottery, cooking)	10.83	11.60	12.18
Bite-sized learning aimed at attracting new adult learners	8.27	8.06	8.45
Qualifications for employees as organised with employers	7.39	7.41	7.90
Apprenticeships/work-based training	4.61	4.71	4.76
Academic qualifications for adults (eg A-level mathematics)	8.05	8.79	9.68
Foundation degrees	8.80	8.20	7.87
ESOL provision	8.72	8.61	8.52
The new Diplomas	8.05	7.97	8.06
Basic skills courses for adults (Skills For Life)	6.01	5.81	5.80
Access to HE provision	7.88	8.62	8.67

Please describe any other priorities that are not listed above

Priorities	No.	%
All are important/equal priority	12	10.5
Academic qualifications for young people/ school leavers/16–18	8	7.0
A-levels/A-levels for young people	10	8.8
Vocational levels 3 and 4	5	4.4
Level 3/Level 4 academic for 16–19	2	1.8
Level 2	4	3.5
Vocational qualification for the unemployed	2	1.8
Retraining/upskilling/refresher training for adults	4	3.5
Adult courses for adults with learning difficulties/disabilities	4	3.5
Courses/support for those with special needs/ learning difficulties/dyslexia	7	6.1
Community development/courses/links/ meetings/drop-in centres/forums	4	3.5
Key/Functional skills for all ages	6	5.3
Training lecturers to deliver courses	1	0.9
Teacher training level 2 vocational	1	0.9
Teacher training qualifications/Skills for Life	2	1.8
Literacy	7	6.1
Communication	2	1.8
Numeracy	5	4.4
IT courses/IT for adults/ICT	4	3.5
Employment skills	10	8.8
CPD courses for industry	2	1.8
Other	30	26.3

(Based on comments from 114 respondents. Percentages add up to more than 100% as some respondents listed more than one additional priority).

Q6 Please use the space below to provide any additional comments in relation to this section.

Priority areas	No.	%
All are priority/all are important	61	24.5
Too difficult to prioritise	51	20.5
Skills for Life/Basic Skills	2	0.8
Key/functional/essential skills	15	6.0
Diplomas/A-levels should be supported	15	6.0
Training for specific job roles	6	2.4
Preparing people for employment	9	3.6
Young people are the future workforce	1	0.4
Training for the workforce/those in work	1	0.4
There is a need to make available more free courses for mature learners	1	0.4
Adult education/bite-size adult courses/raising skills in adults	13	5.2
Colleges for adults with learning difficulties/disabilities	2	0.8
Comparing funding for colleges/schools/HE etc	7	2.8
ESOL	11	4.4
Long term funding	7	2.8
Quality of student coming from school	2	0.8
Staying on in education/training after 16	1	0.4
Employers should fund training	7	2.8
Training/qualifications for teachers/lecturers	3	1.2
Funding for lowest achieving group/NEET	1	0.4
Offer more support to 16-18 when school leaving age is raised to 18	3	1.2
Funding shouldn't be related to age	1	0.4
Employers should be able to access funding for training	2	0.8
Other	55	22.1

(Based on comments from 249 respondents. Percentages add up to more than 100% as some respondents recorded comments on more than one priority area).

College structures and regulation

Q7 Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Moving 14–19 funding to local authorities from the LSC will lead to better outcomes for learners

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	37 (6.8%)	121 (22.1%)	244 (44.5%)	108 (19.7%)	38 (6.9%)
Manager	25 (5.9%)	81 (19.1%)	155 (36.6%)	112 (26.5%)	50 (11.8%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	7 (3.2%)	27 (12.2%)	55 (24.9%)	70 (31.7%)	62 (28.1%)
Other	6 (8.1%)	12 (16.2%)	35 (47.3%)	17 (23.0%)	4 (5.4%)
Overall	75 (5.9%)	241 (19.0%)	489 (38.6%)	307 (24.2%)	154 (12.2%)

The role of FE should be formally split along pre-19 and post-19 lines

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	51 (9.3%)	173 (31.6%)	112 (20.4%)	158 (28.8%)	54 (9.9%)
Manager	34 (8.1%)	121 (28.7%)	55 (13.1%)	138 (32.8%)	73 (17.3%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	12 (5.4%)	35 (15.8%)	29 (13.1%)	81 (36.7%)	64 (29.0%)
Other	8 (11.0%)	20 (27.4%)	16 (21.9%)	22 (30.1%)	7 (9.6%)
Overall	105 (8.3%)	349 (27.6%)	212 (16.8%)	399 (31.6%)	198 (15.7%)

Raising the leaving learning age from 16 to 18 will be advantageous for colleges

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	50 (9.1%)	175 (31.8%)	96 (17.5%)	147 (26.7%)	82 (14.9%)
Manager	21 (5.0%)	146 (34.5%)	109 (25.8%)	99 (23.4%)	48 (11.3%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	18 (8.1%)	79 (35.7%)	62 (28.1%)	47 (21.3%)	15 (6.8%)
Other	6 (8.3%)	28 (38.9%)	14 (19.4%)	18 (25.0%)	6 (8.3%)
Overall	95 (7.5%)	428 (33.8%)	281 (22.2%)	311 (24.6%)	151 (11.9%)

On the whole, larger colleges are better at meeting the needs of learners, employers and communities than smaller colleges

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	30 (5.5%)	96 (17.5%)	162 (29.5%)	189 (34.4%)	72 (13.1%)
Manager	23 (5.4%)	82 (19.3%)	123 (29.0%)	137 (32.3%)	59 (13.9%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	13 (5.9%)	46 (20.9%)	52 (23.6%)	63 (28.6%)	46 (20.9%)
Other	1 (1.4%)	19 (25.7%)	27 (36.5%)	19 (25.7%)	8 (10.8%)
Overall	67 (5.3%)	243 (19.2%)	364 (28.7%)	408 (32.2%)	185 (14.6%)

On the whole, college mergers benefit learners and employers

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	18 (3.3%)	76 (13.8%)	199 (36.2%)	177 (32.2%)	79 (14.4%)
Manager	10 (2.4%)	76 (17.9%)	150 (35.4%)	129 (30.4%)	59 (13.9%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	5 (2.3%)	38 (17.3%)	67 (30.5%)	64 (29.1%)	46 (20.9%)
Other	2 (2.7%)	14 (18.9%)	31 (41.9%)	18 (24.3%)	9 (12.2%)
Overall	35 (2.8%)	204 (16.1%)	447 (35.3%)	388 (30.6%)	193 (15.2%)

Regulatory functions, such as inspection, should be put in the hands of the sector

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	83 (15.1%)	247 (45.0%)	130 (23.7%)	70 (12.8%)	19 (3.5%)
Manager	71 (16.8%)	179 (42.4%)	81 (19.2%)	75 (17.8%)	16 (3.8%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	53 (24.2%)	87 (39.7%)	21 (9.6%)	51 (23.3%)	7 (3.2%)
Other	5 (6.8%)	29 (39.2%)	23 (31.1%)	12 (16.2%)	5 (6.8%)
Overall	212 (16.8%)	542 (42.9%)	255 (20.2%)	208 (16.5%)	47 (3.7%)

Money for quality improvement should go directly to colleges rather than be managed centrally

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	166 (30.1%)	296 (53.7%)	53 (9.6%)	31 (5.6%)	5 (0.9%)
Manager	140 (33.1%)	218 (51.5%)	34 (8.0%)	24 (5.7%)	7 (1.7%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	101 (45.7%)	95 (43.0%)	10 (4.5%)	14 (6.3%)	1 (0.5%)
Other	15 (20.3%)	42 (56.8%)	12 (16.2%)	5 (6.8%)	0 (0%)
Overall	422 (33.3%)	651 (51.3%)	109 (8.6%)	74 (5.8%)	13 (1.0%)

Colleges should be subject to national targets

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	29 (5.3%)	218 (39.8%)	103 (18.8%)	140 (25.5%)	58 (10.6%)
Manager	35 (8.3%)	197 (46.7%)	73 (17.3%)	82 (19.4%)	35 (8.3%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	23 (10.4%)	126 (57.0%)	34 (15.4%)	33 (14.9%)	5 (2.3%)
Other	14 (19.2%)	28 (38.4%)	16 (21.9%)	10 (13.7%)	5 (6.8%)
Overall	101 (8.0%)	569 (45.0%)	226 (17.9%)	265 (21.0%)	103 (8.1%)

The label 'further education' is no longer helpful for colleges as they communicate to learners, communities and employers

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	56 (10.2%)	152 (27.7%)	183 (33.3%)	121 (22.0%)	37 (6.7%)
Manager	62 (14.7%)	118 (28.0%)	134 (31.8%)	89 (21.1%)	19 (4.5%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	30 (13.6%)	73 (33.0%)	68 (30.8%)	39 (17.6%)	11 (5.0%)
Other	9 (12.2%)	26 (35.1%)	20 (27%)	16 (21.6%)	3 (4.1%)
Overall	157 (12.4%)	369 (29.1%)	405 (32.0%)	265 (20.9%)	70 (5.5%)

Colleges should be opened up to stronger market competition

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	18 (3.3%)	104 (19.0%)	142 (25.9%)	181 (33.0%)	103 (18.8%)
Manager	18 (4.3%)	91 (21.5%)	103 (24.3%)	133 (31.4%)	78 (18.4%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/ Head teacher	14 (6.4%)	37 (16.9%)	56 (25.6%)	82 (37.4%)	30 (13.7%)
Other	8 (10.8%)	19 (25.7%)	21 (28.4%)	18 (24.3%)	8 (10.8%)
Overall	58 (4.6%)	251 (19.9%)	322 (25.5%)	414 (32.8%)	219 (17.3%)

Q8 Please use the space below to provide any additional comments in relation to this section.

Topics	No.	%
Education is not a business/commercial venture/ commodity	16	8.3
Education is an investment for the future	6	3.1
Mergers/size of college	19	10.0
Targets	35	18.3
Market competition	51	26.7
Funding going to the college	17	8.9
Funding going to LA	5	2.6
Keeping the FE label/brand recognition	12	6.3
School leaving age	11	5.8
Self regulating/self-evaluation	6	3.1
Inspection/Ofsted	11	5.8
Investment	1	0.5
Freedom/autonomy	7	3.7
Clarity between schools and colleges	1	0.5
Training	2	1.1
Pre/post-19 year old split	16	8.4
Other	40	20.9

(Based on comments from 191 respondents. Percentages add up to more than 100% as some respondents recorded comments on more than one topic).

Seeking new staff for the FE sector

Q9 Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Recruiting more high calibre graduates into FE careers will benefit the sector (eg benefits to learners, help improve standards etc)

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	138 (25.0%)	244 (44.3%)	96 (17.4%)	59 (10.7%)	14 (2.5%)
Manager	145 (34.2%)	164 (38.7%)	70 (16.5%)	38 (9.0%)	7 (1.7%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	84 (38.0%)	92 (41.6%)	30 (13.6%)	15 (6.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Other	25 (33.8%)	27 (36.5%)	8 (10.8%)	12 (16.2%)	2 (2.7%)
Overall	392 (30.9%)	527 (41.5%)	204 (16.1%)	124 (9.8%)	23 (1.8%)

Recruiting more managers from business into college management teams will benefit the sector (eg benefits to learners, help improve standards etc)

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	51 (9.3%)	145 (26.3%)	111 (20.1%)	173 (31.4%)	71 (12.9%)
Manager	58 (13.7%)	134 (31.6%)	95 (22.4%)	98 (23.1%)	39 (9.2%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	30 (13.6%)	80 (36.4%)	59 (26.8%)	44 (20.0%)	7 (3.2%)
Other	18 (24.3%)	24 (32.4%)	12 (16.2%)	14 (18.9%)	6 (8.1%)
Overall	157 (12.4%)	383 (30.2%)	277 (21.8%)	329 (25.9%)	123 (9.7%)

Recruiting more highly skilled vocational specialists into FE careers will benefit the sector (eg benefits to learners, help improve standards, etc)

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	207 (37.6%)	301 (54.6%)	27 (4.9%)	15 (2.7%)	1 (0.2%)
Manager	203 (48.0%)	192 (45.4%)	22 (5.2%)	5 (1.2%)	1 (0.2%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	99 (45.0%)	108 (49.1%)	11 (5.0%)	2 (0.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Other	29 (39.7%)	38 (52.1%)	2 (2.7%)	4 (5.5%)	0 (0%)
Overall	538 (42.5%)	639 (50.4%)	62 (4.9%)	26 (2.1%)	2 (0.2%)

FE sector pay and conditions are suitable for attracting talented people

Grade of respondent	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	3 (0.5%)	21 (3.8%)	37 (6.7%)	175 (31.8%)	315 (57.2%)
Manager	1 (0.2%)	11 (2.6%)	28 (6.6%)	140 (33.1%)	243 (57.4%)
Senior manager/director/principal/CEO/Head teacher	5 (2.3%)	16 (7.3%)	15 (6.8%)	91 (41.4%)	93 (42.3%)
Other	1 (1.4%)	4 (5.4%)	9 (12.2%)	30 (40.5%)	30 (40.5%)
Overall	10 (0.8%)	52 (4.1%)	89 (7.0%)	436 (34.4%)	681 (53.7%)

Q10 Please use the space below to provide any additional comments in relation to this section.

Topics	No.	%
FE is the 'Cinderella' /the poor relation of the education sector	16	6.1
Pay should be linked to qualifications	3	1.2
Offer higher pay/pay is too low/pay conditions are lower than schools/HE/sixth form college/business/industry	98	37.4
Pay is too low to recruit/retain high calibre staff	46	17.6
More should be done to attract high calibre staff on vocational courses/difficult to attract those with suitable qualifications/skills	18	6.9
Quality/standard of managers/the need for an understanding of education	48	18.3
Teachers need to have more time/support to teach/less time spent on paperwork etc	9	3.4
Role has become too demanding/too much pressure/workload forces good people to leave	14	5.3
More permanent posts/less hourly paid contracts	3	1.2
Education should not be seen as a business/education is about people not cash/the needs of the learner should come first	10	3.8
Quality/knowledge/experience of vocational specialists/teachers	18	6.9
Quality/knowledge/experience of graduates	12	4.6
Other	21	8.0

(Based on comments from 262 respondents. Percentages add up to more than 100% as some respondents recorded comments on more than one topic).

About you

Sex	No.	%
Male	515	40.6
Female	753	59.4

Age	No.	%
Under 30	48	3.8
31–44 years	336	26.4
45–59 years	824	64.8
60 years +	64	5.0

Role	No.	%
Lecturer/teacher/trainer	553	43.5
Manager	424	33.3
Senior manager/director	182	14.3
Principal/CEO/head teacher	39	3.1
Other	74	5.8

The future of further education: an opinion survey

At a time of unprecedented change in further education, this research paper investigates the future direction of the sector. Through a major survey delivered in partnership the *Guardian* further education pages, LSN investigated whether the sector's workforce supports the government's vision for the future, the degree of consensus, and people's own visions for the future. The report explores a variety of themes, identifying the sector's views on curriculum, qualifications and skills reform; funding priorities; college structures and regulation; and the prospects for attracting a new generation of staff into further education.