# THE FE AND TRAINING CONVERSATION: RESEARCH SUMMARY

This paper presents a summary of the Education and Training Foundation's (ETF) research project, **The FE and Training Conversation**.

Our aim was to understand more about the current experiences and challenges of practitioners working across the Further Education (FE) and training sector to ensure that our work delivers even greater levels of targeted support to benefit sector need, as well as improving career opportunities and stepping up on our work to champion the professionalism of those working within FE and Training.

We wanted to understand more about the challenges faced by leaders, teachers, trainers, governors and support staff, as well as their views on the training, resources and support the ETF currently provides.

This research formed the first part of a wider strategic listening exercise that has taken place over the past few months involving representatives from sector organisations to help inform the development of ETF's future strategic direction that will be announced next year.

A sector-wide survey received more than 4,200 responses from FE and training practitioners across the country, offering a unique insight into the FE and training Sector. Further insight was gathered through a series of focus groups that enabled us to explore emerging themes in greater depth.

Below is a summary of the approach and methodology to the research, as well as the survey highlights and key findings from the focus groups.

## METHODOLOGY

Membership Matters, research specialists in the membership and educational sectors, undertook the research on behalf of ETF over May and June 2022. They took a qualitative approach, conducting insight interviews and workshops, surveys and focus groups.

The research was conducted in three stages. The first was through discovery; conducting workshops, interviews and desk research. The second stage was through an online survey. The third stage was four focus groups that explored emerging themes of rewards and challenges of working in the sector, as well as investigating in more detail the views and experiences of users of ETF training and services and participants views on how we can improve our current support offer as well as support that we might develop in the future.

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As well as qualitative research, Membership Matters also conducted thematic analysis so the data could be used quantitively, which involved coding the qualitative data and identifying and reviewing key themes. Each theme was examined to gain an understanding of respondents' perceptions and motivations.
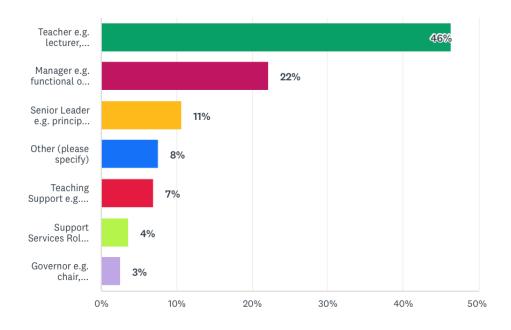
The methodology was as follows:

1. Qualitative data gathered from 4,252 responses
2. Data extracted and key concepts coded
3. Data processed to determine frequency and colour coded to highlight overlaps with Intellexer text mining
4. Manual manipulation to refine categories, web tagging applied that shows which categories share responses to decide whether to combine certain categories or to create new ones
5. Summarise findings, evaluate themes for a good fit
6. Export result and present as easy to read data.

## SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

### Job role

In the survey, we asked the question: what best describes your current job/ role in the FE and Training sector? The responses were:
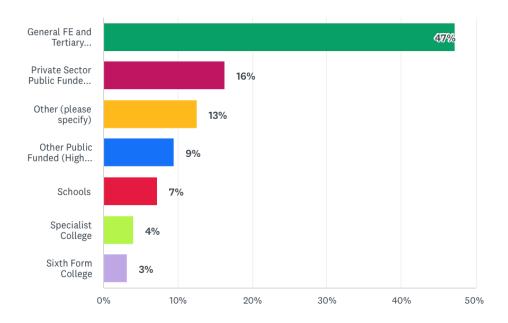
- 46% teachers (teacher, lecturer, trainer, instructor or tutor)
- 22% managers (functional or people manager, faculty, department, curriculum, programme lead)
- 11% senior leaders (principal, vice principal, senior manager, CEO, director)
- 8% other (mixed roles, tutors, careers advisors)
- 7% teaching support (teaching assistant, mentor, assessor)
- 4% support services role (admin, tech support, HR, Finance)
- 3% governor (chair, governance, professional, trustee, non-executive director).



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**Place of work**

In the survey, we asked the question: what type of organisation do you work for or did you work for? The responses were:
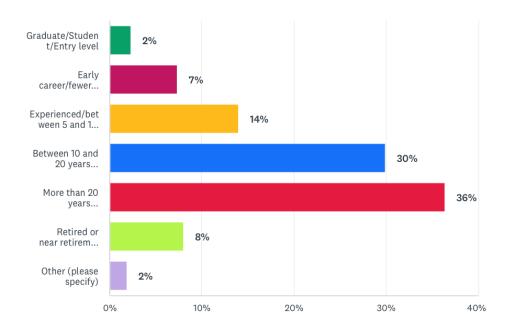
- 47% general FE and Tertiary College
- 16% private sector public funded (independent training provider)
- 13% other
- 9% other public funded (higher education institution, local authority)
- 7% schools
- 4% specialist college
- 3% sixth form college



**Career level**

In the survey, we asked the question: what best describes your career level / time working in the sector? The responses were:
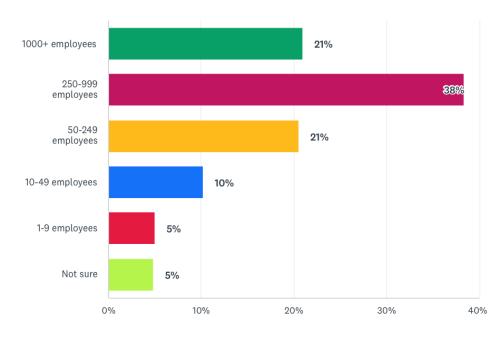
- 36% more than 20 years
- 30% between 10 and 20 years
- 14% experienced/ between 5 and 10 years
- 8% retired or near retirement
- 7% early career/ fewer than 5 years
- 2% graduate/ student/ entry level
- 2% other

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| | |
|---|---|
| Graduate/Student/Entry level | 2% |
| Early career/fewer... | 7% |
| Experienced/between 5 and 1... | 14% |
| Between 10 and 20 years... | 30% |
| More than 20 years... | 36% |
| Retired or near retirem... | 8% |
| Other (please specify) | 2% |

**Size of organisation**

In the survey, we asked the question: what is the size of your current or most recent organisation? The responses were:
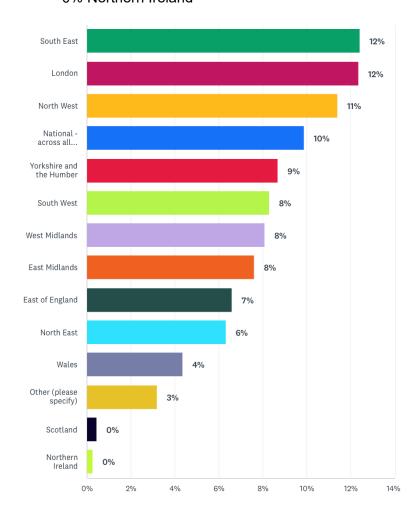
- 38% between 250-999 employees
- 21% over 1,000 employees
- 21% between 50-249 employees
- 10% between 10-49 employees
- 5% between 1-9 employees
- 5% not sure

| | |
|---|---|
| 1000+ employees | 21% |
| 250-999 employees | 38% |
| 50-249 employees | 21% |
| 10-49 employees | 10% |
| 1-9 employees | 5% |
| Not sure | 5% |

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**Location**

In the survey, we asked the question: in which country/ region is your organisation based? The responses were:
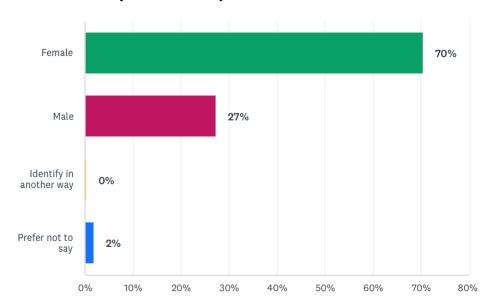
- 12% South East
- 12% London
- 11% North West
- 10% National – across all regions
- 9% Yorkshire and the Humber
- 8% South West
- 8% West Midlands
- 8% East Midlands
- 7% East of England
- 6% North East
- 4% Wales
- 3% Other
- 0% Scotland
- 0% Northern Ireland



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**Gender**

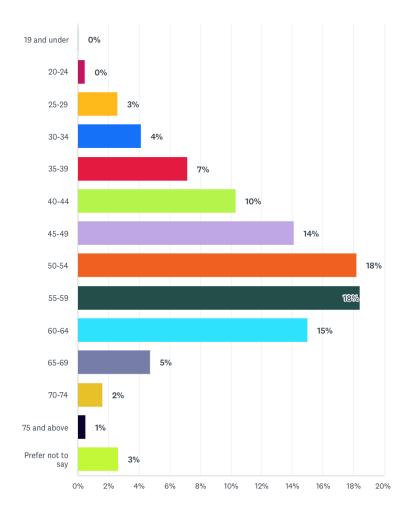In the survey, we asked the question: what is your gender? The responses were:

- 70% female
- 27% male
- 2% prefer not to say
- 0% identify in another way



**Age**

In the survey, we asked the question: which age bracket do you fall into? The responses were:

- 18% between 55-59 years old
- 18% between 50-54 years old
- 15% between 60-64 years old
- 14% between 45-49 years old
- 10% between 40-44 years old
- 7% between 35-39 years old
- 5% between 65-69 years old
- 4% between 30-34 years old
- 3% between 25-29 years old
- 3% prefer not to say
- 2% between 70-74 years old
- 1% 75 years old and above
- 0% between 20-24 years old
- 0% 19 years old and under

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| Age group | Percentage |
|---|---|
| 19 and under | 0% |
| 20-24 | 0% |
| 25-29 | 3% |
| 30-34 | 4% |
| 35-39 | 7% |
| 40-44 | 10% |
| 45-49 | 14% |
| 50-54 | 18% |
| 55-59 | 18% |
| 60-64 | 15% |
| 65-69 | 5% |
| 70-74 | 2% |
| 75 and above | 1% |
| Prefer not to say | 3% |

## KEY FINDINGS

**Key findings: most rewarding aspect of the job role**

In the survey, we asked what is the most rewarding aspect of the job role.

Responses:

- 82% said: inspiring students, changing lives, making a difference
- 7% said: being part of a team, community, FE professionals, peer support, inspiring, coaching, mentoring staff
- 2% said: working with SEND, vulnerable, hard to reach learners
- 1% said: delivery of quality education despite pandemic

Here is a selection of quotes on the most rewarding aspect of the job role:

- "Working with learners and staff to continually improve and develop our provision to see learners achieve their goals."
- "Seeing students achieve outcomes. Working with colleagues to transform lives."
- "Engaging with FE lecturers and other stakeholders who work to support and improve FE education."
- "Being able to see students and staff reach their goals and develop."
- "Developing staff within a supportive-but-challenging institutional culture."

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**Key findings: frustrating aspects of job role**

In the survey, we asked what is the most frustrating aspect about the job.

Responses:

- 23% said: Paperwork / compliance/ poor administrative systems
- 18% said: Changing landscape of FE
- 14% said: Lack of funding/ resources
- 10% said: Time pressure
- 6% said: Salary/ terms and conditions
- 6% said: Leadership challenge
- 5% said: Challenging behaviour
- 2% said: Recruitment challenge
- 1% said: Insufficient training
- 1% said: Lack of peer/ staff support

Here is a selection of quotes on the most frustrating aspect:

- "The current college systems and processes are outdated and are a barrier to effective change and communication."
- "The sheer amount of paperwork which now has to be completed digitally."
- "The constant changes in the FE regulatory framework."
- "A constant changing framework that is not fit for purpose and sets young people up to fail."
- "Not having enough funding to do all the things we aspire to do."
- "Not having access to necessary resources needed."
- "Not enough time for the workload in the contracted hours."
- "Ensuring that staff have time to undertake training/development."

**Key findings: current FE challenges**

In the survey, we asked what is the most important challenge facing the FE and Training sector right now.

Responses:

- 31% said: sector funding
- 19% said: recruitment
- 12% said: pay/ conditions
- 7% said: Covid recovery
- 7% said: qualification landscape
- 5% said: mental health
- 4% said: student behaviour
- 3% said: government approach to FE
- 1% said: addressing digital skills gap
- 1% said: lack of training/ wider CPD support

Here is a selection of quotes on most important challenges:

- "Funding cuts, the trend for education centres having to take on business partners to stay afloat and the learning of knowledge being second to bringing in business."

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- "Funding is a huge issue and it impacts the creative sector in particular."
- "Increasing demands and expectations with limited budgets and staffing pressures."
- "Staffing, recruitment and retention."
- "Delivering outstanding education on a reduced budget and retaining staff."
- "Recruitment, as staff can earn more elsewhere in jobs with less pressure."
- "The 'Covid Generation' has been a big challenge, as some of them have started on a qualification that is too high – due to them being given higher grades."
- "Mental health after Covid 19."
- "Mental health of staff, those leaving the sector and fewer wanting to join."
- "Mental health of young people post-pandemic. We are already seeing the effect and I think this is just the start. As well as general funding, greater funding for our mental health resources is vital."

**Key findings: future challenges**

In the survey, we asked what do you think will be the most important challenge facing the FE and Training sector in five years' time.

Responses:

- 25% said: sector funding
- 18% said: recruitment
- 6% said: changing qualification landscape
- 6% said: addressing digital skills gap
- 3% said: Covid recovery
- 3% said: government approach to FE
- 3% said: lack of training/ wider CPD support
- 2% said: mental health
- 2% said: pay/ conditions
- 1% said: student behaviour

Here is a selection of quotes on the most important future challenges:

- "The competition from private training providers and funding constraints due to austerity measures are likely to be the biggest challenges ahead."
- "Funding and keeping afloat with rising costs everywhere. Sustainability and carbon neutral/ net zero."
- "Staff shortage and skills shortage. Many of my respected colleagues are leaving the profession due to workload and lack of support."
- "T Levels, de-funding of qualifications, IT estate and lack of investment over previous years."
- "Qualifications to match business needs in this ever-changing environment we live in."
- "Keeping up to date with technology and providing the right equipment for learners to progress in today's society."
- "Technology advancements and training staff in line with these."

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**Key findings: priorities that would most benefit FE**

In the survey, we asked which of the following ETF priorities would most benefit the FE and training sector.

Responses:

- 30% said: Develop the capability of the sector by designing and delivering continuous professional development
- 20% said: Help raise the status of the profession by championing teachers, trainers and leaders
- 11% said: Provide teaching tools, research and thought-leadership in FE
- 10% said: Improve job prospects/ career advancement in FE
- 10% said: Help the sector identify the most effective practice and support dissemination
- 10% said: Work with sector leaders and thinkers to identify the most significant priorities for the future FE system
- 9% Grow sector capacity and address recruitment and other capacity issues.


## FOCUS GROUPS

Four focus groups were conducted involving more than 40 FE and training professionals working in different job roles from across the sector.

These focus groups explored emerging themes from the survey research, including the rewards and challenges of working in the sector, the views and experiences of users of ETF training and services, as well as views on how we can improve our current offer and support that we might develop in the future.

Some of the key themes emerging from the focus groups were:

**Working in the sector can be extremely rewarding**

Focus group participants described how working in the sector can be incredibly rewarding. It is clear that further education and training professionals can wear multiple hats and cross over a number of roles with themes many referring to their status as being of 'dual-' or 'multi-professionalism'.

Some of the main rewards of working in the sector were:

- **Impacting lives:**
  Seeing the difference practitioners make to young people's lives / opportunity to make an impact upskilling learners.

- **Student and learner progress:**
  Seeing students progress and achieve and grow in confidence and ability.


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- **Student confidence and achievement:**
  Seeing students/learners gain confidence in the subject and pass exams / achieve goals.

- **Being part of a community of FE professionals:**
  Focus on professional development and learning

Some of the comments made were:

- "Bringing fun back into education and training."
- "Bringing smiles to learners faces."
- "To have a positive influence on people lives."
- "To raise standards."
- "To shape futures and inspire"
- "Working with people."

**Importance of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**

There was a general consensus across the focus groups that CPD is essential and positive for continued development and raising standards. The importance of high quality CPD emerged as a key theme with managers regarding high quality CPD as invaluable for them to offer professional development to staff.

Comments and frustrations around not having ample time to undertake and complete CPD emerged as a common theme. Comments included:

- "We are not given the time off."
- "It is unpaid in our own time, unlike the private sector which sends their employees on course and gives time off and remuneration."

Participants also explored the importance of relevance of CPD to their particular sector (eg college / independent learning provider / school), subject areas and/or job role.

**Working in the sector brings a wide range of challenges and frustrations**

Work frustrations in the current climate were wide-ranging and key topics emerging were:

- **Funding environment:**
  Lack of funding, constant changes in policy as well as salary/terms & conditions.

- **Mental health/ stress:**
  Dealing with students mental health / behavioural challenge, as well as managing own stress and mental health.

- **Time constraints:**
  Not getting preparation time for marking and planning lessons properly.

- **Lack of admin support and limited resources:**
  Additional admin duties previously carried out by admin support, and a lack of work/life balance.

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A striking highlight from these discussions was the struggle with mental health and wellbeing experienced by teachers, trainers and support staff, as well as the knock-on impact of supporting learners with mental health challenges.

**Comments included:**

- "Lack of wellbeing"
- "Poor work life balance"
- "Lack of progression"
- "Isolation and long hours"

**Next steps**

The ETF are using the results of this survey to improve our offer to our customers over the coming months. It will also be used alongside the findings from our wider strategic review listening exercise to ensure that the future direction of the ETF best meets sector need. We continue to seek input from the sector through our wide range of advisory groups whose insight and experience is so valuable in ensuring that our work is driven by and for the sector.

***To stay in touch about latest developments on research findings and our future work, please sign up to our ETF newsletter to receive monthly updates at www.et-foundation.co.uk/newsletters/***