EDUCATION TRAINING FOUNDATION

AI READINESS ACROSS FE AND SKILLS: A LEADERSHIP INSIGHT REPORT ON ADOPTION, GOVERNANCE AND WORKFORCE CAPABILITY

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FOREWORD

I have spent most of my professional life in and around further education (FE) and skills, as a teacher, leader, CEO, and advocate for a sector that consistently delivers more than it is resourced for and is often underestimated by policymakers. I have watched FE and skills navigate the post incorporation shock of the 1990s, the qualification reform cycles of the 2000s, the austerity decade of the 2010s, and the pandemic. The sector has absorbed all of it.

AI is different. Not because the structural pressures FE and skills faces are new, but because AI is simultaneously reshaping the labour market that FE and skills exist to serve, the administrative and pedagogical processes through which FE and skills delivers, and the governance frameworks through which FE and skills is held accountable. Three transformations are occurring simultaneously, each at a different pace, in a sector already stretched thin.

The genesis of this paper began with a specific incident. I was talking to three senior sector leaders about my regional economic development and investment work with global tech partners, and AI naturally came up. Each described pilot work, small-scale trials, and training but could not answer fundamental questions I had been exploring with the tech partners around AI governance: Who is responsible for AI? How are AI decisions made? Are the models, processes, and data integrity within the pilots clear? Are there AI trials happening in the institution that leaders are unaware of?

These are experienced and committed leaders, but their experiences also reveal a wider strategy and governance gap: the absence of frameworks that adequately support leaders to ask the right questions about AI systems they are increasingly expected to oversee and implement. In practice, this governance gap can be subtle. In one provider, staff had begun using generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot and Grammarly to draft lesson materials, simplify learner-facing content, and generate formative assessment questions. Elsewhere, AI-enabled marking and feedback tools were being trialled informally within a curriculum area to support workload reduction. None of these activities were inappropriate in themselves, and in many cases, they were motivated by professionalism and a desire to improve learning. However, they were not always visible to senior leaders or governing bodies, and there was limited clarity about what data was being entered into tools, what safeguards applied, and whether learners were being supported to use AI ethically. This is how AI adoption often begins: not through a single strategic decision, but through well-intentioned experimentation that outpaces organisational oversight.

Accordingly, this paper stems from a central hypothesis and a set of test questions against an academic framework that I devised with leading AI scholars that proposes that: there is a fundamental lack of clear governance oversight, strategic development and leadership understanding of AI within the FE and skills sector. It tests this through a sector-wide survey of leaders, delivered by the Education Training Foundation (ETF), examining the current state of AI adoption. It presents survey findings and introduces practical models to help interpret what the data reveals about AI readiness in FE and skills, enabling leaders to reflect on their current position and navigate next steps. These models are rooted in scholarship and designed for use by college principals, boards, curriculum leaders, and senior leadership teams navigating AI in real time.

AI is more than another digital tool. It is a general-purpose technology that will shape what good teaching looks like, what employers demand, and what learners expect from education. FE and skills providers are therefore not only responding to AI; they are uniquely positioned to shape how it is used responsibly in the workforce and in society. The question is not whether AI will enter the FE and skills system, but whether it will enter in a way that strengthens professionalism, safeguards learners, and improves outcomes.

FE and skills has been here before, at the frontier of national need, absorbing change it did not design and cannot fully control. What it has not had is a governance framework adequate to the specific challenge that AI now represents.

These findings should not be interpreted as a lack of ambition or innovation in the sector. On the contrary, the scale of activity reported by leaders suggests that FE and skills providers are actively engaging with AI and exploring how it can enhance teaching, learning and operational efficiency. However, as with earlier waves of digital transformation, the pace of experimentation has moved faster than the development of shared governance models, workforce capability and system-wide guidance. The sector is therefore at an important point of transition: moving from isolated pilots towards more strategic, sustainable and equitable adoption.

The opportunity here is for FE and skills to lead, not simply respond. The sector has always been a cornerstone of inclusion, economic renewal and local opportunity, supporting learners who are often closest to the labour market and most exposed to economic change. If adopted well, AI can strengthen this mission: enabling more personalised learning, improving accessibility, supporting staff capacity, and helping providers respond faster to evolving employer need. In a period where public trust, productivity and social cohesion are under pressure, FE and skills has a distinctive civic role to play in shaping how AI is understood and used responsibly, both in education and in the communities and industries it serves.

Stuart Rimmer MBE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The further education (FE) and skills sector occupies a unique and strategically important position within the UK's education and economic systems. Through technical education, vocational training and adult education, the sector equips individuals with the capabilities required to enter employment, advance their careers and adapt to the labour market. It provides the technical and vocational qualifications through which much of the workforce in health and social care, construction, engineering, business administration, and the creative industries develops its foundational capability. In doing so, it is crucial for boosting productivity, meeting industry needs, promoting social mobility, and strengthening the UK's workforce for future growth.

AI's rapid advancement has significantly changed the economy and will continue to do so. It is transforming industry operations, skills requirements, and daily life at an unprecedented pace.

The UK Government has ambitious plans for AI and views it as a fundamental part of its mission to break down barriers to opportunity for children and young people. The Department for Education (DfE, 2025) has stated that:

> **If used safely, effectively and with the right infrastructure in place, AI can ensure that every child and young person, regardless of their background, is able to achieve at school or college and develop the knowledge and skills they need for life.**

For the FE and skills sector, which sits at the intersection of skills development, social mobility, prosperity, and long-term success, AI presents both a significant opportunity and responsibility. The sector plays a vital role in supporting learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those for whom traditional academic pathways are not accessible or appropriate. In this context, it is essential that the FE and skills sector harness AI in ways that best support all learners, contributing to improved economic productivity and greater social mobility.

This matters because AI adoption is accelerating faster than many organisations' ability to govern and implement it consistently. Learners are already using generative AI tools in their education and everyday lives, while employers increasingly expect digital confidence and AI-related capability across a wide range of occupations. Without clearer leadership, stronger workforce development, and more coordinated sector support, there is a risk that AI adoption becomes uneven across FE and skills providers, widening existing inequalities in learner experience, organisational capability, and workforce readiness.

It is important, then, that leaders, including college principals, board members, curriculum leaders, and senior teams navigating AI-related decisions, are equipped to make informed decisions about the adoption and use of AI within their organisation.

The research presented in this report draws on a survey of leaders from across the UK FE and skills sector. It provides a snapshot of current AI adoption across the sector, the readiness of the workforce and learners to use AI, and the challenges and barriers to successful AI deployment.

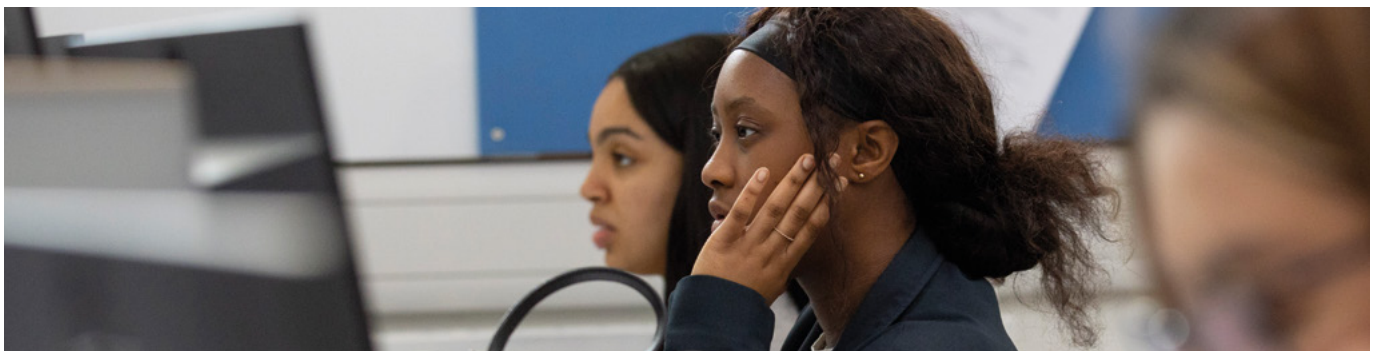
At a glance: what sector leaders told us

Responses from 193 leaders across the FE and skills sector suggest that AI adoption is moving quickly, but that many providers are still building the foundations needed for confident, consistent and safe implementation. Key findings from 193 FE and skills leaders include:

- **90%** reported AI initiatives in the last 12 months
- only **17%** believe their organisation is well prepared for AI
- only **27%** report having an AI governance framework
- **68%** report AI literacy is not yet routinely taught to learners
- over **two-thirds** rated the digital divide as a high risk for widening inequality.

Our findings show widespread interest across the sector in using AI, reflected in the finding that 90% of leaders reported undertaking some form of AI initiative in the past 12 months, primarily to support teaching and learning. However, usage remains limited across most other functions, with particularly low adoption in areas such as student support services, administrative processes, and assessment.

Despite this widespread interest in AI, most leaders felt their organisation was not yet ready to adopt and use it as effectively as they would like. Leaders cited limited leadership readiness, insufficient governance frameworks, and obsolete data governance practices as key barriers. In many organisations, there is not yet a joined-up approach to AI adoption. This does not reflect a lack of ambition in the sector. Rather, it reflects a system moving quickly in an environment where governance, funding, guidance and capacity have not yet caught up with the pace of technological change. For example, leaders described staff using AI to support lesson planning, generate differentiated activities, adapt materials for different learner needs, and produce draft resources more efficiently. By contrast, AI remains far less commonly applied to wider organisational functions such as HR and workforce planning, finance and procurement, enrolment and admissions processes, management information systems (MIS), or the triage of learner support and wellbeing services; these are all areas where AI could potentially deliver significant operational efficiencies and improve responsiveness if implemented safely and strategically, although will inevitably require investment and strategic choices.



Leaders also highlighted a range of structural barriers beyond their own organisations that are affecting AI adoption across the FE and skills sector. These include concerns that current funding levels are insufficient to enable meaningful innovation, the absence of a shared sector-wide vision to guide adoption, a lack of clear national guidance on AI ethics and governance for FE and skills providers, and limited access to external AI expertise.

Despite growing use of AI in teaching, leaders reported that both staff and learners are not yet ready to use it effectively. In some cases, staff confidence remains low, with limited understanding of how to apply AI in practice, and only a minority of organisations provide sufficient CPD to upskill staff and build capability. At the same time, while leaders recognise the potential benefits of AI for learners, very few believe learners are currently equipped to use it meaningfully, with most organisations yet to embed AI literacy into the curriculum.

The challenge posed by the digital divide remains, with some learners lacking consistent and reliable access to the technologies needed to engage with AI, risking the reinforcement of existing inequalities. While this is widely acknowledged by leaders, relatively few organisations are running programmes or initiatives to support learners at risk of digital exclusion.

Overall, while experimentation with AI is widespread, the findings highlight a growing mismatch between adoption and leadership, governance, and data oversight required to support its safe and effective use. Without action, there is a real risk that AI becomes embedded inconsistently across the sector, increasing exposure to ethical, safeguarding, and quality risks. As AI moves from innovative practice to a basic expectation, it will be essential to ensure it is integrated effectively, responsibly, and equitably across FE and skills to realise its potential to enhance teaching, learning, and skills development, without widening existing inequalities across providers and learners.

Recommendations

The findings from this research indicate that the FE and skills sector is actively engaging with AI, with widespread experimentation and early adoption underway. However, the survey also highlights a gap between activity and readiness. The recommendations below are designed to support FE and skills leaders, governing bodies, policymakers and sector partners in moving from isolated initiatives towards consistent, safe and scalable AI adoption.

These recommendations are intentionally framed as both provider-level actions and system-level enablers, recognising that many of the barriers to effective AI adoption sit beyond the control of individual organisations.

1 **Establish AI leadership accountability and governance as a foundation for safe adoption**

FE and skills providers should move towards clearer internal accountability for AI strategy and oversight. This should include a named senior leader, or a leadership facilitated working group who are responsible for AI adoption, with appropriate links to data protection, safeguarding, quality, curriculum and operational delivery. Governing bodies should also strengthen their capability to provide oversight of AI-related risks and opportunities, ensuring that AI is integrated into existing frameworks for organisational assurance and risk management. The appointed leader or working group should report routinely to the senior leadership team and governing body, ensuring transparency in AI adoption, shared visibility of risk, and consistency in organisational expectations.

2 **Adopt a structured AI readiness diagnostic to support risk and strategic decision-making.**

Providers should undertake structured diagnostic activity to assess their current readiness for AI. This should cover leadership maturity, governance and assurance, workforce capability, infrastructure and digital access, and the organisation's approach to curriculum and assessment integrity. This diagnostic approach should be repeated periodically, enabling leaders to track progress and identify priority actions.

3 **Strengthen professional development as a core workforce priority.**

Leaders should prioritise workforce development as a central pillar of AI readiness. This includes CPD that develops both technical understanding and pedagogical confidence, enabling staff to use AI tools effectively in curriculum design, teaching and learning, assessment and feedback, and operational practice. Furthermore, the CPD should be led by sector professionals or FE and skills professional bodies to ensure that the training remains relevant to the pedagogies unique to post-16 education.

4 **Embed AI literacy for learners as a core entitlement, not an optional add-on.**

Providers should work towards ensuring that AI literacy becomes a routine part of learner experience across programmes. AI literacy should be understood as a practical employability and citizenship capability, including the ability to use AI tools appropriately, evaluate accuracy, recognise bias, understand ethical implications, and apply AI in work-relevant contexts. This theme would work particularly well within a wider, holistic tutorial programme which runs alongside the learner's vocational study.

5 **Reduce the risk of widening inequality by addressing digital exclusion as part of AI strategy.**

Providers and system partners should ensure that AI adoption does not widen existing inequalities. This includes assessing learner access to reliable devices and connectivity, ensuring learners can use AI safely in supported environments, and strengthening digital inclusion programmes for those at risk of exclusion.

6 **Develop a shared sector approach to AI standards, guidance and impact evaluation.**

The FE and skills sector would benefit from clearer shared guidance and approaches on AI governance, ethical use, and assessment integrity, including guidance on when and how to use AI in ways which may enhance the learning experience. Leaders expressed a strong view that national guidance and a shared sector-wide vision are currently lacking. Without common frameworks, providers risk duplicating effort and developing inconsistent approaches.

7 **Convene partnership approaches to strengthen access to expertise and reduce duplication.**

Given the pace of AI change, providers cannot be expected to develop expertise independently in every area. The findings highlight a perceived lack of access to external AI expertise across the sector. To address this, the sector should strengthen partnership approaches that connect FE and skills providers with trusted expertise in data protection, procurement, ethics, technical implementation and curriculum innovation.

Further research

This is a small-scale study that provides an important first step in better understanding how ready the FE and skills sector, and its workforce, are to adopt AI. It draws on a sample of leaders that may not be fully representative of the wider sector. As such, further research would be valuable to develop a more in-depth understanding of how AI is being used in practice, the level of readiness across different parts of the sector, what is needed to support effective adoption, and the impact AI can make on teaching, learning, and organisational processes.

Further research would support the development of evidence-based guidance on what works, for whom, and under what conditions, helping the sector avoid fragmented experimentation and instead build scalable, transferable practice.

Further research, informed by these findings, may also look at the use of AI in more depth across different areas of interest, including how it is embedded in teaching, learning and assessment, the experiences of learners, how AI can be made more inclusive such as for learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and the wider factors shaping adoption. Questions that the further research may seek to address are, for example:

- what measurable impact does AI have on learner attainment, retention and progression?
- where does AI improve staff workload, and where does it create additional burden?
- how can AI support learners with SEND without reinforcing bias?
- what governance models are emerging as effective in FE and skills settings?

INTRODUCTION

FE and skills form a central component of the UK's education system and labour market infrastructure. The sector encompasses technical education, apprenticeships, vocational learning, and adult education delivered through colleges, independent training providers, employer-led provision, and community organisations.

Together, these institutions provide learning opportunities for millions of individuals each year, supporting progression across a wide range of occupational pathways and life stages. Because FE and skills providers train large proportions of the UK workforce, the sector is uniquely positioned to influence not only how AI is used in education, but how it is used in the workplace. AI readiness in FE and skills is therefore a national productivity issue as much as an educational one.

Unlike other parts of the education system, FE operates at the intersection of education and employment, translating occupational need into curriculum, pedagogy and workforce capability at pace. It provides a primary mechanism through which individuals develop the practical knowledge, occupational competence, and technical capabilities required by employers. The sector therefore plays a critical role in supporting national economic priorities, with industries such as advanced manufacturing, digital technologies, construction, healthcare, and the green economy all relying on workforce capability developed within FE and skills institutions. In this context, FE is central to both social mobility and national economic productivity.

AI is already reshaping labour market demand, workplace practices, and the skills employers value across many of the sectors served by FE and skills providers (World Economic Forum, 2025). Administrative and business support roles increasingly require familiarity with AI-enabled productivity tools; construction and engineering employers are adopting AI-supported design, modelling and planning systems; and health and social care services are exploring AI to support scheduling, triage and decision-making. As AI becomes more embedded in workplace practice, employers are placing greater emphasis on digital confidence, critical judgement, adaptability, and the ability to work effectively alongside AI systems.

This creates a dual challenge for the FE and skills sector. Providers must adapt to the impact of AI on their own teaching, learning and organisational operations, while also ensuring learners develop the capabilities required to succeed in an increasingly AI-enabled economy. Given the pace of technological change, there is growing concern that parts of the sector may struggle to keep pace without stronger leadership capability, workforce development, and system-wide support.

The rapid public emergence of generative AI tools, particularly following the launch of ChatGPT in 2022, opened new debates across the sector about its benefits and limitations (OECD, 2023). Its adoption in FE and skills organisations has been met with both enthusiasm and concern. On the one hand, AI enables personalised learning experiences, expands access to education, improves teaching efficiency by reducing administrative burdens and supports lifelong learning; on the other, it raises significant challenges around academic integrity, ethical concerns and the irreplaceable role of practitioners. For FE leaders, this has meant navigating decisions around AI in an uncertain and relatively underexplored area, balancing both the perceived opportunities and risks (Luckin et al., 2016).

The strategic importance of AI to education and workforce development is reinforced by the UK Government's AI Opportunities Action Plan (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2025) which identifies education, workforce capability and public sector innovation as central to the UK's future economic competitiveness. The Action Plan highlights the need to expand AI skills through higher education, FE, apprenticeships and lifelong learning, while also promoting the responsible adoption of AI across public services, including education. The DfE (2025) has similarly emphasised the potential for AI to support improved educational outcomes, reduce workload pressures, and strengthen access to learning when implemented safely, ethically and effectively.

What is Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to computer systems that are capable of performing tasks that would normally require human intelligence. These tasks can include recognising patterns, analysing information, making predictions, supporting decision-making, and understanding or generating natural language.

Generative AI is a specific type of AI that can create new content in response to user prompts. Using large-scale training data drawn from a wide range of sources, generative AI tools can produce text, images, audio, video and computer code. Tools such as chatbots and AI assistants are increasingly being used across education and the workplace to support communication, planning, content creation and problem-solving (UNESCO, 2023).

AI-enabled systems are digital tools and platforms that use AI functionality to automate, support or enhance processes and services. In education and organisational settings, these systems may be used to:

- provide learner support through chatbots and virtual assistants
- generate automated feedback and learning resources
- support decision-making through predictive analytics and data insights
- enhance management information and administrative systems
- streamline routine operational processes.

Open-source AI refers to AI models and tools that are made publicly available for organisations to adapt, customise and deploy locally. This can create opportunities for greater flexibility, innovation and organisational control, while also reducing dependency on commercial platforms and services.

However, open-source AI may also require stronger local capability in areas such as governance, cyber security, assurance, technical oversight and risk management to ensure systems are implemented safely and responsibly.

AI technologies are developing rapidly and are increasingly embedded across education, employment and public services. Many AI-enabled tools are already part of everyday digital systems and workflows, creating significant opportunities to improve efficiency, accessibility and user experience, while also introducing important considerations relating to ethics, governance, safeguarding, data protection and public trust.

Against this backdrop of rapid technological change, the aim of this research is to provide insight from FE and skills sector leaders into how AI is currently being adopted and used across organisations, the extent to which staff and learners are prepared to engage with AI effectively, where gaps in readiness and capability remain, and what support may be needed to enable safe, effective and inclusive implementation.

This report is intended as a practical leadership resource. It does not frame AI adoption in FE and skills as a binary choice between innovation and risk, but as an emerging area of organisational and professional maturity. The findings highlight both the sector's strong appetite to engage with AI and the wider system conditions needed to support responsible adoption at scale. In particular, the report emphasises the importance of leadership, governance, workforce capability and inclusion in ensuring that AI strengthens learner outcomes, supports workforce development, protects public trust, and contributes positively to the future of FE and skills.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research presented in this report draws on survey findings from a non-probability sample of 193 leaders from across the UK FE and skills sector. The survey was conducted over a four-week period spanning the Autumn term of 2025 and the Spring term of 2026.

Respondents represented a range of leadership roles, including heads of department, curriculum managers, and senior leaders such as principals and CEOs. They were drawn from a variety of FE and skills organisations, including FE colleges, independent training providers (ITPs), and adult education providers.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by job role

Job Role	Percentage
Executive e.g. principal, chief executive, managing director	17%
Senior leader e.g. assistant principal, vice principal, director	26%
Middle leader e.g. head of department/ faculty/ school	43%
Other leadership e.g. SENCo, safeguarding lead, key stage lead, specialist lead	15%

Source: ETF AI Readiness Survey (n=193). Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by organisation

Organisation	Percentage
FE college	39%
Independent training provider	30%
Adult education	11%
Specialist college	6%
Sixth form college	3%
Employer with in-house training	3%
Other FE and skills organisation	8%

Source: ETF AI readiness survey (n=193).

The survey was designed to assess the adoption of AI within FE organisations and to develop understanding in the following areas:

- AI readiness: the extent to which organisations, staff, and the wider sector are prepared to adopt AI
- AI use: how staff and learners use AI within and beyond the classroom
- AI gaps and needs: where there are gaps in AI governance and decision-making, and what support is needed to enable AI adoption.

As with many surveys on emerging practice, respondents are likely to include a higher proportion of leaders already engaged with AI-related developments, meaning results may reflect early adopters more strongly than the full sector profile. Responses were anonymised and analysed in aggregate. No individual or provider-level findings are reported. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents provided information on the basis of informed consent. Responses were handled in line with relevant data protection requirements. Findings should be interpreted as providing insight into emerging patterns of practice and leadership perception across the FE and skills sector, rather than as statistically representative of the entire sector population.

SURVEY RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The following section presents findings from a survey of 193 FE and skills leaders on AI readiness. These insights provide a current picture of how AI is being used across organisations, how its adoption is being managed, and the extent to which the sector is prepared to implement it effectively and ethically.

Widespread interest, uneven AI adoption and limited readiness

The use of AI across the FE and skills sector remains an emerging and developing area of practice rather than a fully embedded organisational capability. Nonetheless, there is clear momentum across the sector, with 90% of leaders reporting that their organisation has undertaken AI-related activity within the past 12 months to support teaching, learning, operations or organisational processes. Recent commentary from Ofsted (2025) has reinforced the view that a key strategic risk for education providers may be failing to engage with AI at all, particularly as learner and employer expectations shift and AI becomes embedded in workplace practice.

AI has most commonly been applied to teaching and learning activities (see Figure 1), for example this could include: lesson planning, differentiation, resource drafting, quiz generation, functional skills practice, ESOL scaffolding, feedback prompts. This is not surprising, given the growing evidence of its potential to save practitioners' time and support teaching and learning, as well as the well-documented workload pressures faced by FE practitioners. By contrast, adoption remains far lower in operational areas such as learner support services, timetabling, admissions and enrolment, finance processes, and quality assurance. This reinforces a pattern of adoption driven by immediate classroom utility, rather than a whole-organisation strategy.

While there is clear interest and momentum, AI use across operations is uneven and still at an early and experimental stage, resulting in a varied and developing picture of use. This suggests that there is clear scope to expand AI use across wider organisational operations, potentially leading to greater efficiency, improved lesson delivery, and more effective use of staff time, enabling staff to focus on delivering high-quality teaching and working directly with learners. A recent report by the AoC (2025) found that in FE colleges the top strategic priorities for AI use were curriculum planning and assessment and staff workload management, with student engagement and retention also emerging as a key area of focus.

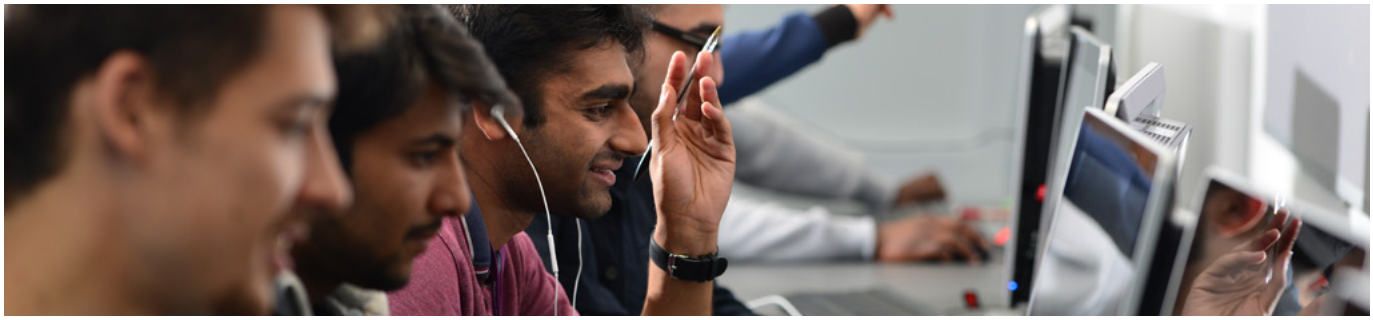
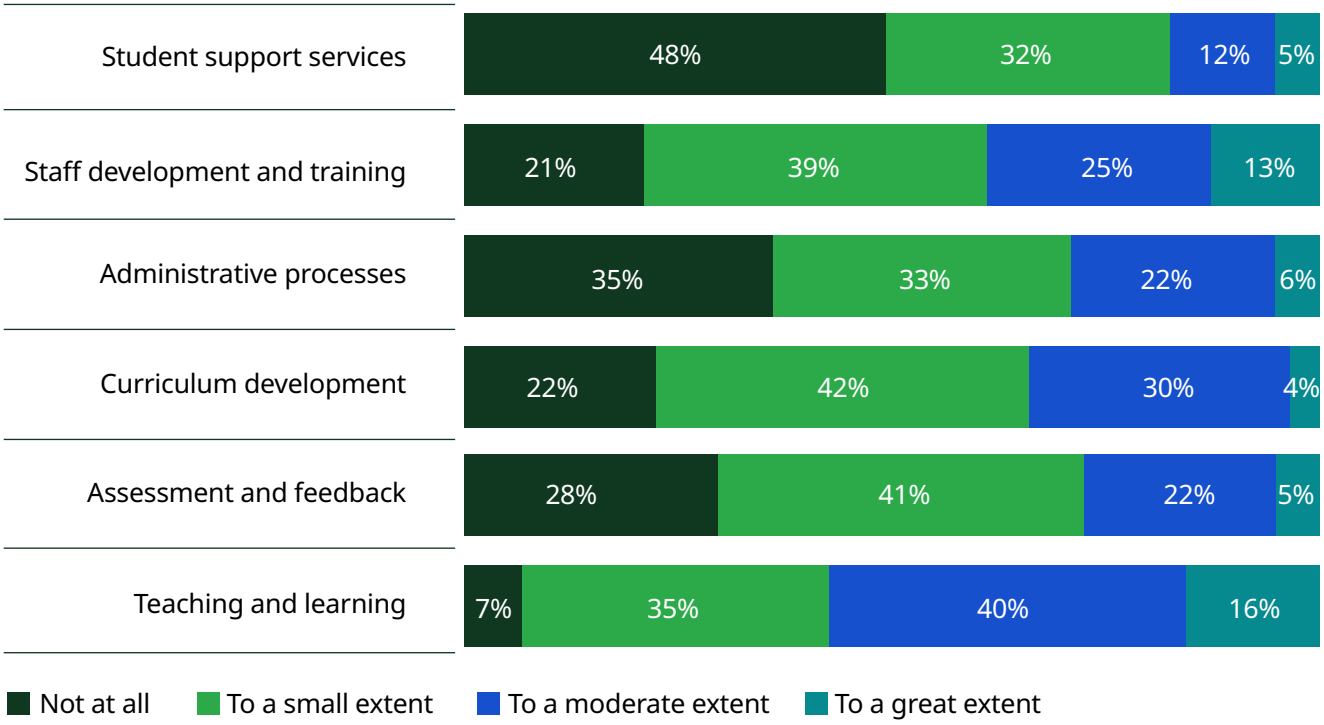


Figure 1: In the past 12 months, to what extent has your organisation used AI for the following?



Source: ETF AI readiness survey (n=193). Non-response categories are not shown; percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding and omission of non-responses.

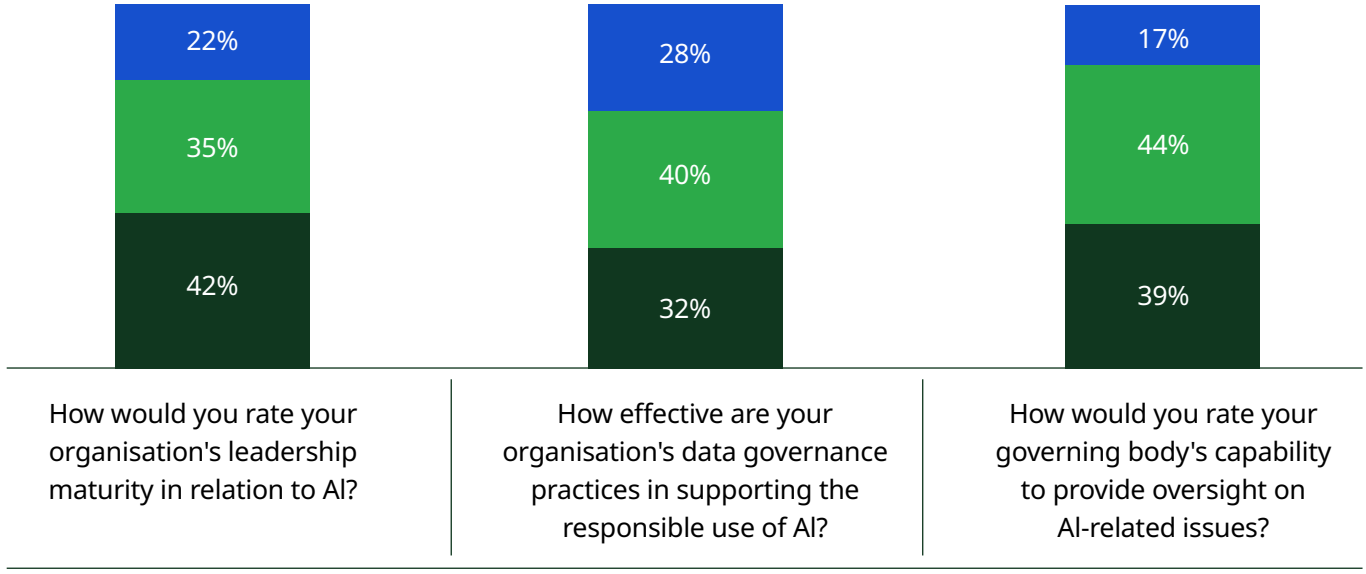
Leaders reported the use of AI to support lesson planning, generate differentiated resources, draft employer-facing materials, develop formative assessment questions, support ESOL learners, and produce learning summaries. Several also noted growing interest in AI-enabled learner support and administrative automation, though this remains less developed.

Despite widespread use of AI across the sector, most leaders felt that their organisation was not yet ready to adopt and use it effectively, with only 17% reporting that their organisation is well prepared to embrace AI. This gap between high levels of activity and low levels of perceived readiness suggests that many organisations are adopting AI in practice before they have established the structures needed to support it at scale. In the short term, this may lead to inconsistent implementation and uneven learner experience. In the longer term, it risks widening variation across the sector unless governance, leadership development and workforce training become more established and consistent.

Leadership, governance and data oversight in AI adoption

One of the most striking findings from the research is that many leaders feel their organisation is still developing the foundations needed to support the responsible adoption of AI. This includes leadership maturity, with only around a quarter reporting this as strong; data governance practices, with under a third reporting them as sufficient; and governing body capability, with only around a fifth feeling these are in place to support effective oversight of AI (Figure 2). This reflects a broader structural challenge: many existing governance and assurance arrangements were not designed to support technologies operating at the pace, scale and complexity associated with contemporary AI systems. As a result, organisations are often adapting existing leadership and governance approaches while simultaneously attempting to implement new technologies.

Figure 2: Organisational readiness for AI: leadership, data governance, and governing oversight.



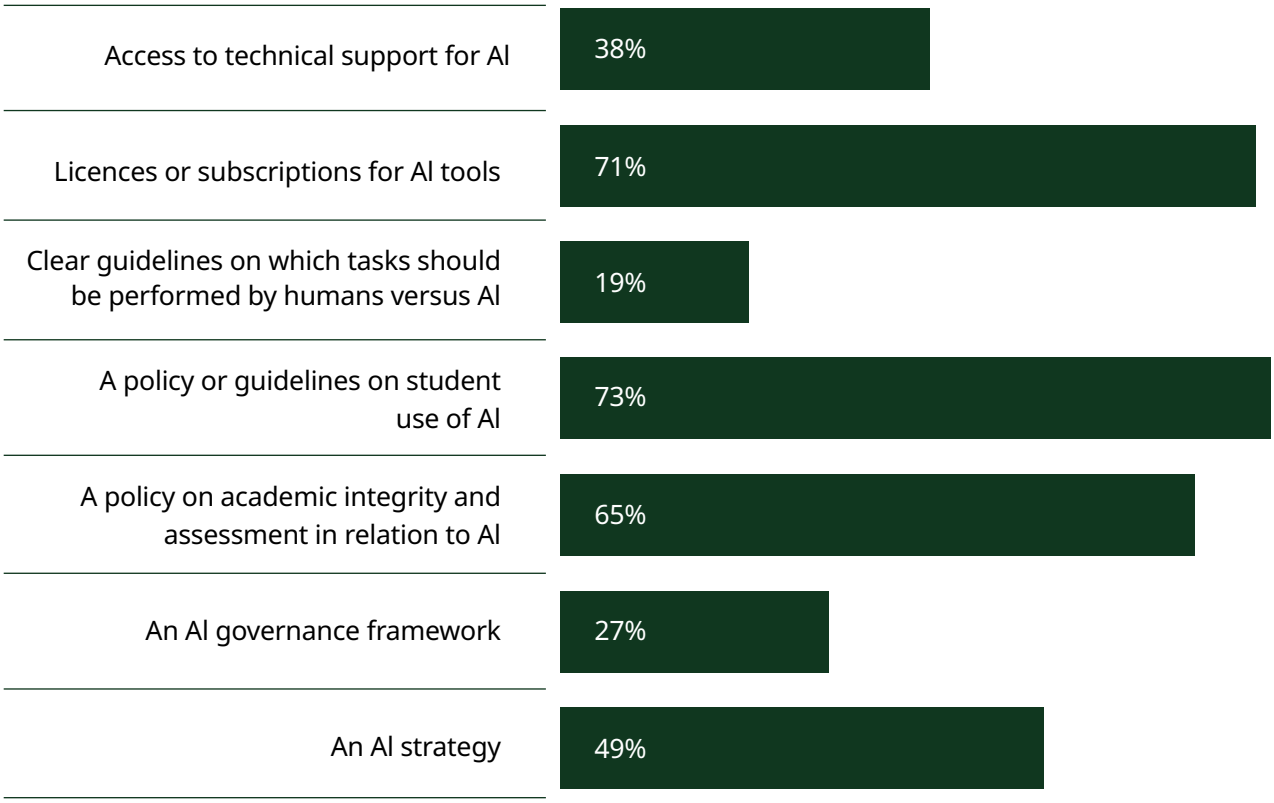
Source: ETF AI readiness survey (n=193). Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Importantly, governance should not be viewed as a barrier to innovation. Effective governance is what enables innovation to scale safely. In the context of AI, clear oversight arrangements give staff confidence about what tools are approved, what safeguards apply, and what ethical and professional boundaries should guide use. Strong governance therefore supports experimentation while protecting learners, staff and organisational reputation.

This is an important finding for the sector, as these elements form the core infrastructure required for safe, consistent and effective implementation. Leadership plays a critical role in setting a clear vision for AI, including developing, implementing, and updating policies, as well as supporting the use of AI tools appropriately. Strong data governance practices help mitigate the risks of data privacy and support the ethical and responsible use of AI. Governing body oversight also provides assurance that robust processes are in place to assess AI tools for bias, data security, and suitability for different learner groups before they are embedded in practice. Where these elements are still developing, organisations may experience more variable adoption and less consistency in how AI is used across teaching and learning and wider operations.

Indeed, this is reflected in the survey findings, which point to uneven approaches to AI adoption across the sector. While some elements of AI readiness are relatively well established, such as policies on student use of AI and academic integrity, and access to AI tools or licences, other key components are far less common. In particular, fewer organisations report having an AI governance framework, access to technical support, or clear guidance on which tasks should be carried out by humans versus AI (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Does your organisation currently have any of the following in place (developed or updated within the last two years)?



Source: ETF AI readiness survey (n=193).

Leaders who reported higher confidence in organisational readiness often described similar building blocks:

- a named senior lead accountable for AI strategy and implementation
- a cross-organisation steering group bringing together curriculum, IT, data protection and quality
- clear procurement and evaluation processes for AI tools
- board-level oversight, including routine reporting on AI risks and benefits
- staff development that combines technical understanding with pedagogy and assessment integrity.

These are not nice to have additions. They form the practical infrastructure needed to move from isolated pilots to consistent organisational adoption.

Where adoption is developing faster than governance arrangements, there is a risk that AI is used in ways that are inconsistent across teams or that staff lack clarity on appropriate boundaries. For example, practitioners may use AI tools to personalise and adapt resources and activities for different learner groups, but without clear organisational guidance on what tools are approved, how data should be handled, or how outputs should be checked. Over time, this could create challenges for assessment integrity and quality assurance, as well as risks related to bias, personal data and misinformation. While nearly two-thirds of leaders reported that leadership understands the risks associated with AI, the findings suggest that many organisations would benefit from more joined-up leadership, governance and data oversight to support confident and responsible deployment.

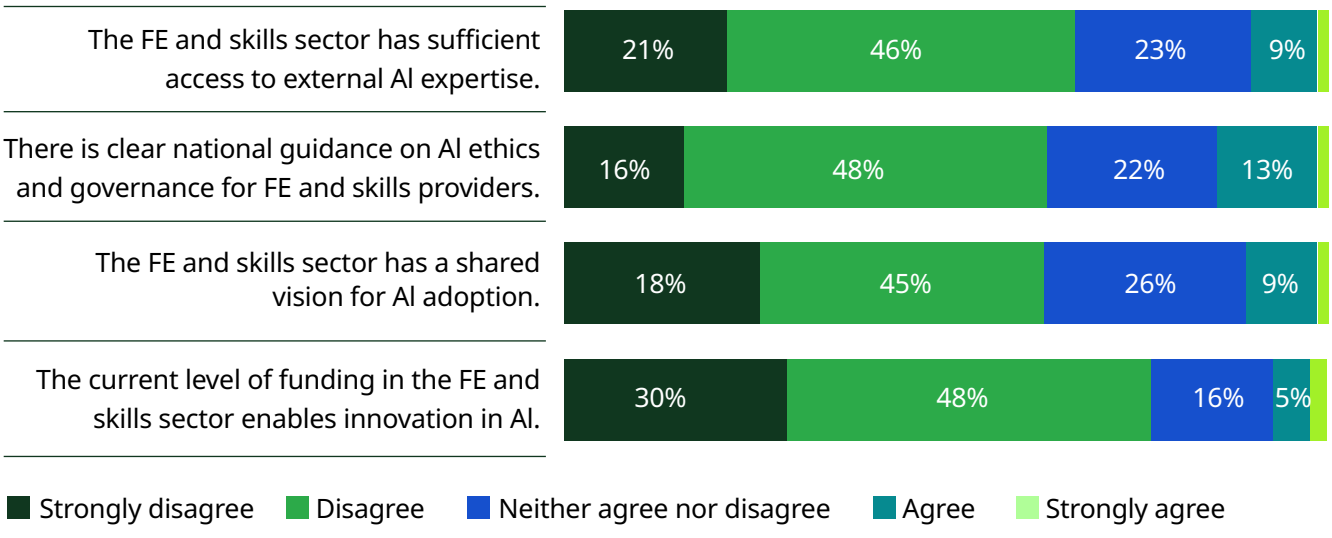
Several leaders have described emerging governance arrangements designed to ensure that AI adoption is both safe and scalable. In practice, this can include an AI steering group chaired by a senior leader, bringing together curriculum, quality, IT, safeguarding and data protection expertise to coordinate decision-making. Some providers have also introduced a named board link governor for AI, ensuring that governing bodies have visibility of developments and can provide informed strategic oversight. To support assurance, providers may maintain an AI risk register aligned to safeguarding, data protection and quality frameworks, enabling risks such as bias, misinformation and inappropriate data use to be monitored and mitigated. Finally, leaders have highlighted the value of introducing a simple procurement and evaluation checklist for AI tools, ensuring that any new technology is assessed consistently for data security, learner impact, ethical considerations and suitability before being adopted more widely.

Barriers to sector-wide AI adoption

Leaders were asked to respond to a set of statements relating to structural enablers of AI adoption across the FE and skills sector. Close to 80% of leaders disagree that current funding levels enable innovation in AI, while over two-thirds disagree that there is a shared sector-wide vision for AI adoption, that there is clear national guidance on AI ethics and governance for FE and skills providers, and that the sector has sufficient access to external AI expertise.

Taken together, these findings point to a clear need for greater investment to support AI innovation and development of validated use cases, a shared strategic vision for the sector, more consistent national guidance on AI ethics and governance, and improved access to external AI expertise. They indicate that many of the barriers to effective AI adoption sit beyond individual providers. While organisations can take important internal steps, progress will also depend on system-level support, including clearer national guidance, stronger sector coordination, and mechanisms to access expertise. Without this, there is a risk that adoption becomes increasingly uneven, driven by local capacity rather than learner need.

Figure 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Source: ETF AI readiness survey (n=193). Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

These challenges cannot be resolved by providers alone. They point to a need for coordinated action across government, sector bodies, employers and technology partners. In practice, leaders have described the need for access to specialist expertise such as legal and data protection advice, support with procurement and due diligence for AI tools, independent evaluation and model assurance (including bias and reliability testing), and practical guidance on curriculum integration and assessment design to ensure AI is embedded in ways that strengthen learning rather than undermine integrity.

AI in teaching: readiness and adoption

At the heart of the FE and skills system is a highly skilled and specialised workforce of practitioners. FE and skills professionals translate occupational knowledge into high-quality learning experiences that support workforce development across the economy. Their work prepares young people entering the labour market, supports apprentices developing occupational expertise, and enables adults to retrain or progress within their careers. As AI skills become more prevalent across the UK economy, particularly in key sectors such as construction, engineering, healthcare, and digital technologies, the role of FE in equipping the workforce with these skills is becoming increasingly important. AI therefore intersects directly with the principle of dual professionalism in FE and skills: staff must remain occupationally current while also sustaining high-quality pedagogy and learner support. In this context, it is increasingly important for practitioners in the FE and skills sector to develop strong AI skills themselves, both to enhance their own practice and to ensure they can effectively support learners in using and applying AI in meaningful, work-relevant ways. AI increases the importance of this dual identity: practitioners must understand how AI is changing industry practice, while also developing the teaching approaches needed to ensure learners can use AI critically, ethically and effectively.

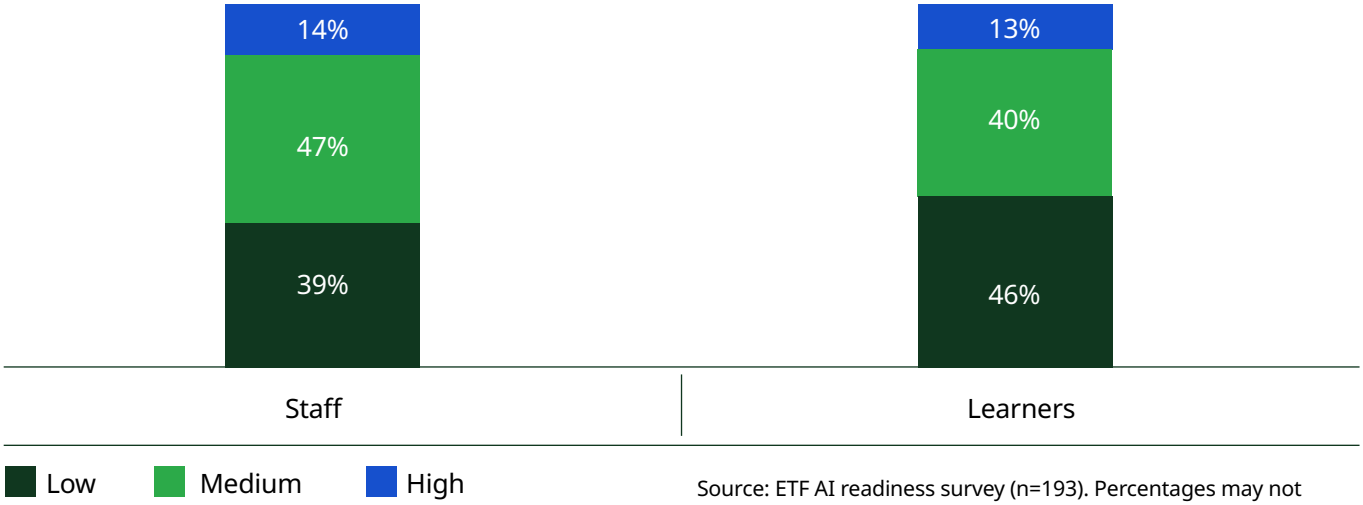
For practitioners, AI also offers significant potential to streamline administrative tasks, support lesson planning, and assist with assessment. It is particularly valuable in reducing workload by automating routine tasks such as marking, planning, and resource creation, enabling practitioners to focus more on high-quality teaching, learner engagement, and the development of effective learning materials. For example, staff have described using AI to generate differentiated worksheets and activities for mixed prior attainment groups, helping to tailor learning materials more efficiently. Others have highlighted the potential to create simulated workplace scenarios for apprentices, supporting learners to practise professional judgement and decision-making in realistic contexts. Leaders have also noted the value of AI in supporting ESOL learners, including translation, rephrasing and the simplification of complex text to strengthen understanding and confidence.

However, survey findings indicate that staff are not yet ready to use AI at scale. Most leaders reported that staff lack confidence in using AI for teaching and learning, with fewer than one in five describing their staff as highly confident. Many leaders highlighted low confidence and uncertainty, noting that staff may be cautious about adopting AI until clearer guidance and safeguards are in place.

Leaders are broadly aware of the potential benefits AI can bring to learners, and there is a clear desire to see it embedded in teaching practice and integrated into the curriculum – 84% of leaders recognise its value for improving learner outcomes, indicating strong support for its wider adoption across organisations. Examples from the sector of how AI can enhance learner experiences include its use in personalised learning and to provide immediate feedback, enabling learners to improve their work in real time. When used in this way, generative AI can also increase motivation and strengthen critical thinking skills. For example, learners can use chatbots to ask questions, explore different perspectives, and critically evaluate the responses and insights generated by AI.

However, despite this strong recognition of its potential, leaders report that both staff and learner readiness to use AI remains low. Staff confidence in particular is seen as limited, and leaders highlight that learners are also not yet adequately prepared to use AI effectively in their learning (see Figure 7). While there is acknowledgement of the need to 'embed AI into teaching and make space in the curriculum for the technology' and that 'AI literacy skill development for students and staff [is] essential skills required for now and the future,' progress in doing so remains limited, with 68% reporting that their organisation has not yet taught AI literacy to learners.

Figure 5: How ready do you think your staff and learners are to use AI effectively?



Source: ETF AI readiness survey (n=193). Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

AI literacy goes beyond knowing how to use a chatbot. It includes the ability to evaluate accuracy, recognise bias, protect personal data, understand the limits of AI-generated outputs, and apply AI appropriately in education and work contexts.

Importance of professional development

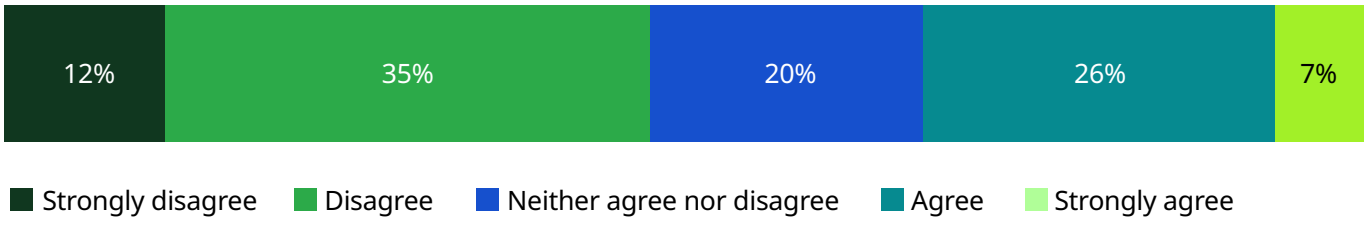
Leaders reported that while some staff are using AI, many remain concerned about the risks and lack the knowledge needed to apply it effectively in practice. This highlights the need for a stronger emphasis on ethical considerations, alongside a clearer understanding of how AI tools work and how they can be used safely and responsibly in teaching and learning. Practitioners need professional development that builds both technical and pedagogical capability. This should enable staff to critically evaluate AI-generated outputs, understand its limitations, and manage the ethical challenges associated with its use. A recent report by AoC (2025) found that FE colleges' top technology priorities are embedding AI and automation tools and delivering staff development programmes in AI use, highlighting the simultaneous need to adopt AI and upskill staff.

However, survey findings suggest that the conditions needed to support effective professional development are not yet fully in place across the sector. Just a third of leaders report that their organisation provides sufficient CPD in AI to upskill staff, and only 38% have access to technical support, while leaders also highlight a lack of time as a key barrier to implementation. Without stronger professional development, protected time, and access to expertise, staff are likely to struggle to develop the confidence and capability needed to use AI safely, effectively, and responsibly in teaching and learning.

The findings reinforce that AI adoption is not only a technological shift, but a professional practice issue. FE and skills practitioners require confidence not only in how to use AI tools, but how to apply them responsibly in ways that align with pedagogy, safeguarding, assessment integrity and occupational standards. As the professional body for the FE and skills workforce, ETF is well placed to support the sector by convening effective practice, strengthening professional standards, and supporting leaders to develop the capability needed to govern AI with confidence. This could include convening effective practice, developing guidance, and strengthening professional standards in relation to AI literacy, ethical use, and governance. AI CPD could include, for example:

- prompt design for teaching
- assessment integrity and authentic assessment redesign
- data protection and tool evaluation
- curriculum integration and AI literacy frameworks.

Figure 6: In the past 12 months my organisation has provided sufficient CPD on AI



Source: ETF AI readiness survey (n=193).

AI, digital inclusion, and the risk of a widening divide

AI's ability to adapt and personalise resources and learning material to meet the needs of individual learners can provide significant opportunities for FE organisations to address existing educational inequalities. However, the 'digital divide' between those with ready access to digital technologies at home and/or within their organisation remains a major barrier to realising this potential, with clear inequalities in both access to, and the ability to effectively use, these technologies. Surveyed leaders reinforced this picture, reporting that a minority of learners do not have reliable digital access at home, putting them at risk of digital exclusion and limiting their ability to benefit from AI adoption. Over two-thirds of leaders believe that the digital divide remains a barrier to learners' engagement with AI.

Leaders also noted that digital exclusion is often place-based and linked to deprivation. Providers serving communities with higher levels of disadvantage may face greater barriers in ensuring learners can access devices, reliable connectivity and the digital confidence needed to engage with AI. This raises the risk that AI adoption accelerates existing inequalities unless inclusion is treated as a core design principle rather than an afterthought. These challenges are also likely to have a strong place-based dimension, with providers serving communities experiencing higher levels of deprivation often facing greater barriers relating to connectivity, device access and digital confidence.

Bridging this divide would require considerable investment in digital resources and training to ensure that all learners benefit equally from AI. This is particularly important for those who may be doubly disadvantaged in not having access to AI at home or within their organisation. However, survey findings suggest that current support is limited, with only 47% of leaders reporting that their organisation has run programmes or initiatives in the past 12 months to support learners at risk of digital exclusion. Where providers are taking action, leaders described initiatives such as device loan schemes, data vouchers or connectivity support, and extended on-site access hubs to ensure learners can use digital tools outside of timetabled sessions. Others highlighted the value of targeted digital skills bootcamps, alongside structured AI literacy workshops, to build learner confidence in using AI tools safely, critically and effectively.

As AI becomes more embedded in teaching, learning, and organisational practice, differences in the maturity of adoption may widen existing inequalities. Organisations with effective AI leadership and governance structures are likely to embed AI more effectively, while those without strong foundations risk falling behind. This creates the possibility of a further divide between learners in organisations where AI is effectively and safely integrated into teaching and learning, and those in providers yet to adopt AI or where it is being deployed without the strong foundations needed for safe and effective implementation. As a result, learners in organisations yet to embed AI effectively may miss out on the benefits it is expected to deliver, with potential implications for future employment, skills development, workforce readiness, and inequality.

Given the stakes involved, it is essential that organisations can implement AI in a way that is inclusive, consistent, and supported by the necessary foundations, ensuring it can be delivered effectively to all learners. If done well, FE organisations can use AI to ensure that every learner passing through the system, regardless of their background, is able to develop the knowledge and skills they need for future employment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This research highlights an FE and skills sector that is actively engaging with AI and increasingly recognising its potential to strengthen teaching, learning and organisational effectiveness. Leaders report widespread experimentation and early adoption, particularly in teaching and learning, reflecting both the pace of technological change and the sector's strong commitment to improving learner experience and outcomes. At the same time, the findings suggest that AI adoption remains uneven and is often developing faster than the governance, leadership capability, workforce confidence and infrastructure needed to embed it consistently and responsibly.

The survey points to a clear gap between activity and readiness. While many providers have begun to introduce AI tools, fewer report having the leadership maturity, data governance arrangements and board-level oversight required to provide assurance, manage risk and guide strategic implementation. This is not a reflection of reluctance or lack of ambition, but of a system responding to rapid innovation in the context of constrained resources, limited national guidance, and uneven access to external expertise. Without stronger foundations, there is a risk that adoption remains fragmented, with variation in practice across organisations and uncertainty among staff and learners about what constitutes safe, ethical and appropriate use.

The findings also underline that AI readiness is inseparable from workforce development and inclusion. If staff are not supported through structured professional development, and if learners are not equipped with AI literacy and reliable digital access, the benefits of AI will be unevenly distributed. In this context, AI adoption is not only a technological challenge but a matter of professional practice, educational equity and public trust. The FE and skills sector has a critical role to play in ensuring learners can navigate an AI-enabled economy confidently and responsibly, particularly given its importance in supporting social mobility, workforce development and national productivity.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the FE and skills sector is approaching a pivotal transition point: moving from experimentation with AI towards the need for more mature, sustainable and system-wide approaches to implementation. The challenge is no longer simply whether providers engage with AI, but whether adoption occurs in ways that strengthen professionalism, improve learner outcomes, support workforce development, and maintain public trust.

With stronger governance frameworks, clearer leadership accountability, investment in workforce capability, and coordinated sector support, FE and skills providers are well positioned to play a leading role in shaping responsible and inclusive AI adoption across education and the wider economy. The opportunity is not only to respond to technological change, but to ensure that AI contributes positively to social mobility, economic inclusion and long-term national productivity.

The question facing the FE and skills sector is no longer whether AI will shape its future, but whether the sector will be sufficiently supported to embed AI equitably, responsibly and with confidence at scale. The next phase is therefore not experimentation with AI, but the development of the leadership, professional, ethical and governance capability required to implement it safely, consistently and in ways that strengthen learner outcomes, public trust and workforce readiness.

Recommendations

The findings from this research indicate that the FE and skills sector is actively engaging with AI, with widespread experimentation and early adoption underway. However, the survey also highlights a gap between activity and readiness, particularly in relation to governance, leadership capability, staff development, and learner access. The recommendations below are designed to support FE and skills leaders, governing bodies, policymakers and sector partners in moving from isolated initiatives towards consistent, safe and scalable AI adoption.

These recommendations are intentionally framed as both provider-level actions and system-level enablers, recognising that many of the barriers to effective AI adoption sit beyond the control of individual organisations.

1 Establish AI leadership accountability and governance as a foundation for safe adoption

FE and skills providers should establish clearer organisational accountability for AI strategy, governance and implementation. This should include a named senior leader, or formally constituted cross-organisational working group, responsible for overseeing AI adoption and ensuring alignment with safeguarding, curriculum quality, data protection, workforce development and operational delivery.

In practice, this means moving beyond informal experimentation and ensuring that AI adoption is underpinned by clear processes for evaluating tools, approving use cases, suggesting recommended AI platforms, monitoring risk, and reviewing impact over time. Effective governance should be framed as an enabler of innovation, giving staff confidence to use AI responsibly while protecting learners and institutional trust.

Providers should also build evaluation into their AI strategy from the outset. Measures of success should include staff workload reduction, staff confidence and wellbeing, learner engagement and retention, and progression outcomes. Alongside these benefits, providers should track assurance measures such as assessment integrity incidents, safeguarding concerns, data protection compliance and learner feedback, ensuring that AI strengthens trust and quality rather than undermining it.

2 Adopt a structured AI readiness diagnostic to support strategic decision-making

Providers should undertake structured diagnostic activity to assess their current readiness for AI. This should cover leadership maturity, governance and assurance, workforce capability, infrastructure and digital access, and the organisation's approach to curriculum and assessment integrity. This diagnostic approach should be repeated periodically, enabling leaders to track progress and identify priority actions.

This report indicates that many organisations are actively using AI while still developing the systems required for consistent adoption. A structured readiness diagnostic provides a practical route to moving from pilots to strategic implementation and supports leaders in identifying where investment and support is most urgently needed.

3 Strengthen professional development as a core workforce priority

Leaders should prioritise workforce development as a central pillar of AI readiness. This includes CPD that develops both technical understanding and pedagogical confidence, enabling staff to use AI tools effectively in curriculum design, teaching and learning, assessment and feedback, and operational practice.

Professional development should include practical training on how generative AI produces outputs, how to identify bias and misinformation, how to evaluate reliability, and how to apply AI safely in contexts involving learner data. It should also support staff to redesign teaching and assessment practices in ways that protect academic integrity and strengthen authentic learning. To be sustainable, CPD must be supported by time, leadership endorsement, and access to appropriate technical support.

Recent research suggests that flexible and blended professional development models are increasingly valued by providers because they enable staff to build capability alongside existing teaching and operational responsibilities. However, effective AI workforce development is also likely to require protected time, leadership support, and opportunities for collaborative professional learning.

ETF provides a comprehensive range of courses, including its digital skills training programmes (EdTech and Essential Digital Skills) and leadership programmes. These offer both on-demand and structured learning opportunities to develop practitioners' capabilities in digital pedagogy, AI literacy, and strategic leadership in emerging technologies.

Examples of possible professional development activity include:

- **Tiered AI professional development programme:** structured CPD offer differentiated by role, including introductory AI awareness sessions for all staff, pedagogical training for teaching staff, governance-focused briefings for leaders and governors, and applied training for curriculum and support teams on safe and effective AI use in practice.
- **Curriculum-focused AI CPD workshops:** hands-on training for teaching staff on integrating generative AI into lesson planning, assessment design, and feedback strategies, alongside guidance on maintaining academic integrity and promoting authentic learner work.
- **Technical and critical AI literacy training:** staff development sessions focused on how generative AI systems produce outputs, including identifying bias, hallucinations, and misinformation, and evaluating the reliability and limitations of AI-generated content in educational contexts.

4 Embed AI literacy for learners as a core entitlement, not an optional add-on

Providers should work towards ensuring that AI literacy becomes a routine part of learner experience across programmes. AI literacy should be understood as a practical employability and citizenship capability, including the ability to use AI tools appropriately, evaluate accuracy, recognise bias, understand ethical implications, and apply AI in work-relevant contexts.

The survey findings suggest that while leaders recognise AI’s potential to improve learner outcomes, most organisations have not yet embedded AI literacy systematically

Without action, there is a risk that learner preparedness for an AI-enabled labour market becomes inconsistent and dependent on local provider capacity rather than learner need. AI use among learners is already widespread across many areas of education and everyday life. Without clear guidance, ethical frameworks and structured support, there is a risk that learner use of AI becomes inconsistent, uncritical, or associated primarily with malpractice concerns rather than meaningful learning and employability development. This should be treated as part of the sector's wider mission to support social mobility and economic participation.

There are a range of approaches emerging across the FE sector to ensure that AI literacy is embedded as a fundamental part of the learner experience, rather than an optional add-on. Here are some examples:

- **AI literacy embedded into weekly tutorials:** structured use of AI tools to support tasks such as CV writing, assignment planning, or research, followed by guided activities where learners evaluate accuracy, identify bias, and reflect on the reliability of outputs.
- **AI literacy integrated into employability support:** learners use AI tools to generate job applications and CVs, cover letters, and interview responses, alongside critical review activities comparing outputs against job specifications and employer expectations.
- **AI literacy embedded within Functional Skills delivery:** use of AI to support reading, writing, and ICT tasks (e.g. summarising texts or solving workplace-style problems), with emphasis on verifying factual accuracy, recognising limitations, and checking for bias or misinformation.
- **AI literacy embedded in vocational programmes:** application of AI tools in sector-specific contexts (e.g. clinical triage decision support and engineering fault diagnosis), with structured evaluation against professional standards, safeguarding requirements, and ethical considerations.

5 Reduce the risk of widening inequality by addressing digital exclusion as part of an AI strategy

Providers and system partners should ensure that AI adoption does not widen existing inequalities. This includes assessing learner access to reliable devices and connectivity, ensuring learners can use AI safely in supported environments, and strengthening digital inclusion programmes for those at risk of exclusion.

Leaders rated the digital divide as a significant risk to equitable AI adoption. If AI becomes embedded in teaching and learning, differences in access may translate into differences in learner attainment, progression and future employability. Digital inclusion should therefore be treated as a core design principle of AI strategy, not a separate or secondary concern.

There are several approaches organisations have taken across the FE sector to reduce the digital divide. These approaches are already in place across many FE providers, typically delivered through student support arrangements, institutional widening participation strategies, and Essential Digital Skills programmes Here are some examples from across the sector[1]:

- **Device loan schemes:** Provision of laptops or tablets to learners who do not have reliable access to suitable devices at home, enabling participation in online and blended learning.
- **Digital access bursaries:** Financial support for learners to help cover the cost of essential digital resources, including devices, broadband, mobile data, or software required for study.
- **Extended on-site access to facilities and equipment:** Provision of extended opening hours for libraries, IT suites, and learning spaces to ensure learners can access devices, connectivity, and supported environments outside scheduled teaching time.
- **Digital confidence workshops:** Structured training sessions designed to develop learners' digital skills, confidence, and capability in using core digital tools, including those increasingly used in AI-enabled learning environments.

6 Develop a shared sector approach to AI standards, guidance and impact evaluation

The FE and skills sector would benefit from clearer shared guidance on AI governance, ethical use, and assessment integrity. Leaders expressed a strong view that national guidance and a shared sector-wide vision are currently lacking. Without common frameworks, providers risk duplicating effort and developing inconsistent approaches.

Alongside shared guidance, the sector should develop stronger approaches to evaluating AI impact. This includes establishing practical measures of success such as staff workload reduction, learner engagement, staff and student retention, achievement, progression, and quality improvement outcomes, alongside safeguarding and academic integrity assurance. This shared approach should support responsible innovation while strengthening trust among learners, employers, regulators and the public.

[1] Loan schemes and bursaries are encouraged by funding guidance for post-16 education, while extended on-site access and digital confidence workshops are informed by sector practice guidance on digital inclusion and skills development

7 Convene partnership approaches to strengthen access to expertise and reduce duplication

Given the pace of AI change, providers cannot be expected to develop expertise independently in every area. The findings highlight a perceived lack of access to external AI expertise across the sector. To address this, the sector should strengthen partnership approaches that connect FE and skills providers with trusted expertise in data protection, procurement, ethics, technical implementation and curriculum innovation.

This should include mechanisms to share effective practice, reduce duplication of policy development, and enable providers to learn from what is working elsewhere. As the professional body for the FE and skills workforce, ETF is well positioned to convene and support this work by building communities of practice, publishing practical guidance, connecting providers with AI thought leaders in the sector, supporting leadership development, and strengthening professional standards in relation to AI.

ETF already delivers a range of initiatives that exemplify this convening role and support shared approaches across the sector, including:

- **Enhance Digital Teaching Platform:** A national, free-to-access platform from ETF offering open-access guidance, curated resources, training modules (including AI), and practical guidance co-developed with sector experts, reducing the need for individual providers to create their own materials.
- **Digital Teaching Professional Framework (DTPF):** A sector-wide framework developed by ETF that defines digital capability standards for practitioners, aligning approaches across providers and avoiding duplication in workforce development.
- **Communities of practice and practitioner networks:** ETF-facilitated national and regional groups that connect practitioners, leaders, and external experts to share effective practice, solve common challenges, and improve access to AI and digital expertise.
- **Collaboration with sector bodies:** Partnership working between ETF and organisations such as Jisc to align guidance, share expertise, and reduce duplication across the FE and skills system.

AI adoption in FE and skills is already underway. Collectively, these recommendations highlight that AI readiness is not primarily a technology issue. It is a leadership, governance and workforce capability issue. The sector's success will depend on whether AI is adopted in ways that strengthen professionalism, protect learners, and enable FE and skills providers to remain responsive to the changing economy. The next phase requires a shift from experimentation to maturity: strengthening leadership confidence, embedding professional development, ensuring governance and trust, and securing equitable access so that all learners benefit.

Further research

This is a small-scale study that provides an important first step in developing understanding of how ready the FE and skills sector, and its workforce, are to adopt AI. The findings should be interpreted with some caution, particularly given the likelihood that respondents may include a higher proportion of organisations already actively engaging with AI-related developments. As such, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences, levels of readiness, or approaches to AI adoption across the wider FE and skills sector.

Further research would therefore be valuable in developing a more detailed understanding of how AI is being used in practice, the level of readiness across different parts of the sector, the conditions needed to support effective adoption, and the impact AI may have on teaching, learning, workforce development, and organisational processes. This could include qualitative case studies across different provider types, exploring governance models, learner experience, curriculum integration, workforce capability, and operational implementation.

Further research, informed by these findings, may also examine AI adoption in greater depth across specific contexts, including teaching, learning and assessment, learner perceptions and experiences, the role of AI in supporting inclusion for SEND learners, and the wider organisational, economic and policy factors shaping adoption across the FE and skills sector.

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