FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

MONOGRAPH

VOICES FROM THE TIGHTROPE: THE ROLE OF DISTRESS AND THE MODERN FURTHER EDUCATION PRINCIPAL/ CHIEF EXECUTIVE

STUART RIMMER

ABOUT FETL

The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

MONOGRAPH

FETL monographs are short, forward-looking treatments of subjects key to the leadership of thinking in further education and skills. Written at the invitation of the Trust, they aim to influence leadership in and of the sector, taking its present needs and concerns as their starting point and looking deeply into the experience of colleagues in order to devise scripts for the future. As with all FETL's work, the intention is not to offer definitive solutions but to engage readers in further thought and debate about issues crucial to the development of FE and skills in the UK, often drawing on ideas from other sectors and disciplines. Each monograph concludes with a number of key ways ahead for the sector.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank all the principal/CEO colleague participants who gave up time in their overly busy schedules to provide survey responses. A particular thanks to colleagues who gave interviews in an open and honest way, allowing me to get to the heart of the issues and impact directly.

Thanks to FETL for allowing me both the intellectual space and stage to voice this issue and, more importantly, for the provision of agency for principals to be engaged in research directly; recording the cacophony of voices from the ever increasingly narrowing tightrope.

Thank you all.

Stuart Rimmer,
CEO East Coast College,
Visiting Senior Fellow in Leadership and Management at University of Suffolk
February 2021

"You know how the tightrope guy at the circus wants everyone to believe his act is an art, but deep down you can see that he's really just hoping he makes it all the way across"
Jodi Picoult

"There is an inevitability of failure if you stay on the tightrope too long"
Anon College Principal 2020.

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FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

It is well understood that leading in further education is highly demanding work. Despite a decade of funding cuts – still a long way from being reversed despite the funding stability granted us in the past couple of years – expectations of the sector remain high. We are subject to regular, high-stakes inspection, the potential costs of failure are high and the accompanying commentary often unforgiving. Reform is a constant, as is the churn among ministers and civil servants. Leaders are often asked to reinvent the wheel by secretaries of state who know little about the sector, and often show no sign of learning from past policy mistakes or misadventures. The combined pressure of constant reform, punitive accountability and high expectations means that leaders can be reluctant to seek help when they need it. Their leadership can become introverted, controlling or defensive. They may struggle not to pass their distress on to their staff. With the COVID-19 lockdown and Brexit asking yet more questions of the sector's leaders, it is little wonder many of them report feeling distressed in their work. The implications of this for health and wellbeing are troubling.

This study, conducted by one of the sector's brightest young leaders, Stuart Rimmer, CEO of East Coast College and Visiting Senior Fellow in Leadership and Management at University of Suffolk, sets out to discover the extent to which FE chief executives and principals are experiencing distress, to define common triggers and to consider what mechanisms leaders can use to ameliorate distress. This astute and thoughtful report offers a hugely valuable perspective from a practising principal able to enrich his research with experience. The Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) has sought to stimulate precisely this type of research, while also trying to ensure that the research that results enriches practice, particularly in leadership.

Drawing on an online survey and eight semi-structured interviews with serving leaders, his findings highlight the stress sector principals and CEOs encounter as a result of the pressures of the job, with distress regularly reported and many participants observing that high levels of distress were becoming a more frequent aspect of the role. Pressure and stress were increasingly difficult to absorb, with a commensurate effect on both work and family life. Survey respondents and interviewees highlighted constant changes in policy and regulation, unreasonable expectations, managing conflict between competing priorities, 'perverse unachievable targets', uncertainty, and threat of sanction as among the leading causes of distress. They spoke, tellingly, of being 'on the tightrope' between the external pressures they faced and the need to protect staff from them, between the need to perform and be positive and the need to 'hide' their distress.

The report makes some smart, constructive recommendations, to CEOs, corporations and the sector, that I hope will be read carefully and seriously. They include the development of peer support networks for leaders to allow authentic engagement and mutual support; more effective engagement between corporations and principals/CEOs to ensure that 'workloads are reasonable and sustainable' and principals 'have a wellbeing support package which could include self-care plans, coaching and/or mentoring and training in wellbeing'; and the review of the regulatory regime by senior officials and college representative bodies 'to ensure that unnecessary or unsustainable pressure is imposed through performance frameworks or the culture of their execution'.

Long-term distress can have a damaging emotional, psychological and physical impact, which make the role of principal a difficult one to sustain over a long period. There is only so much a person can absorb and there comes a point where your personhood is on the line. It is critical, therefore, that we have this conversation, and it has been one of the purposes of FETL in this latter phase of its operations, to get people talking about self-care and the health and wellbeing implications of leadership. I am delighted, therefore, to welcome Stuart's excellent paper. He offers a well-balanced piece of research, grounded in experience and well as scholarly expertise, and approached in a systemic, self-aware and professional way. Importantly, the tone is critical but not blaming. We have had too much of the culture of blaming in further education. We need instead to foster a climate of care and cooperation in the sector.

The report is timely given the implications of the recent white paper and will, I very much hope, force these key issues further up the agenda, where they

deserve to be. It is important that government, the sector, governing bodies and the leaders themselves take note, and give careful attention to the findings. I have always thought that a key aspect of the job of a principal as leaders of learning is to win hearts for the primary task of learning. You cannot buy a heart or instruct a heart – you have to win it. It is also in the nature of the role to be difficult and challenging; a 'tightrope', if you like. If we are to deliver the government's ambitious agenda for FE and our learners' ambitions for their lives, we have to make sure the challenge is not insurmountable, that the pressure is utilized constructively, and that leaders have the help and support they need when they need it. As this paper shows us, we must all be prepared to learn and to put learning at the centre of what we do, not only in caring for our students and communities, but for ourselves too.

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

ABSTRACT

There have been a number of studies investigating stress in the education sector with findings indicating that teachers, head teachers and higher education staff experience high levels of work related stress (Travers, 1996; Johnson, et al (2005). However, there has been no research looking specifically at the prevalence and causes of stress among Further Education (FE) principal/CEOs.

This study was carried out as a contribution to the body of research, led by FETL, on leadership within the further education sector and, more specifically, as a contribution to leadership research on the impact and prevalence of distress.

The overall aim was to get an understanding of distress within current principals within the FE sector and give voice and agency to principals by reporting and discussing the issues of distress and wellbeing.

Research aims were to: discover the extent to which FE CEOs are experiencing stress; define common triggers for distress which are structurally inherent in the role (giving consideration to the conflicts within the CEO role as currently constituted); collate interventions that leaders make in self-care and coping mechanisms to ameliorate distress; explore the responses to stressors and potential longer term implications of distress within the role of the FE CEO.

The study adopted a mixed method research design, using quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis approaches.

Findings were that a high proportion of principal/CEOs experienced stress on a frequent basis. Distress is thought to have long term impacts emotionally, psychologically and physically and challenges whether being in a principal role is a long term sustainable position for many. Distress is increasingly recognised as an issue for the sector, supported by the findings of this research but there is suggestion its symptoms, its triggers and its impacts, to some extent, have been translated into a necessary, or intrinsic cost of, being in role.

It is hoped that through research behaviour change can be adopted by individuals, colleges and policy makers in order to lower overall levels of distress for principals within the sector.

INTRODUCTION

It is easy to argue that in this fast paced society the speed of life is increasing and impacting the world of work, creating conditions that are increasingly difficult with lower job satisfaction, insecurity and conditions that structurally create patterns of overworking. This is particularly acute within the FE Sector. The average employee experiences increasing levels of stress (or more specifically distress). The higher up the ladder of responsibility and accountability then this distress can be more prevalent and/or to some degree expected.

Within the FE sector the role of principal/CEO is vital to success of institutions by providing high quality leadership and management. The role has dramatically changed and developed over the last decade, becoming increasingly complex and under pressure from policy flux and institutional instability combined with the challenges of the modern workplace.

This may create the conditions where there is an imbalance between perceived demands and the ability for individual CEOs to have the resources to cope (which in turn is referred to as 'distress'). To date, there has been no direct published research that has explored the contribution of distress to the experience of principal/CEOs in FE colleges.

Key research questions

In order to gain a better understanding for the sector this report explores some key research questions.

- To discover within the sample population, the extent to which FE CEOs are experiencing distress
- To define common triggers for distress which are structurally inherent in the role (giving consideration to the conflicts within the CEO role as currently constituted)
- Collating interventions that leaders make in self-care and coping mechanisms to ameliorate distress
- Explore the responses to stressors and potential longer term implications of distress within the role of CEO.

The aims of this study will be to provide a cross-thematic analysis of the above research questions using existing literature reviews, semi-structured interviews and primary quantitative research (gathered by questionnaire from existing principals/CEOs).

Under each theme the report will make recommendations at three key levels. Firstly, recommendations to the individual. Secondly, to the college as an institution. Finally, to the wider sector including associations, researchers and policy makers.

The overall aim of the research is to begin an urgent, and arguably long overdue, discussion within the sector, to acknowledge that distress has become part of the accepted every day. Furthermore, challenge our sector to make commitments to understand more deeply the impacts of stress at individual, college or sector levels and begin to take steps to rapidly reduce distress.

Structure of this report

The report will provide a brief description of the current policy context before an exploration of the literature, more directly related to what is known about workplace distress. A research methodology will be briefly presented before findings are described from primary research. Recommendations using a thematic approach will be presented ahead of closing remarks.

CONTEXT OF STUDY

FE Landscape

This report recognises the strongly changing policy landscape in FE and ultimately its' importance to the impact on leadership and management. A detailed rehearsal of this position is not required within this paper, as it has been rigorously covered by other recent reports, most notably Simon Keller in "A framework for leading in FE and Skills 2021" where he gives a detailed account of the range of system and strategic reforms that has affected curriculum, quality and wider systems implications. "While the promise of the FE White Paper remains, the disruption caused by the onset of the pandemic and counter measures have created social, economic, educational and health related challenges for sector leaders the like and scale of which would have been unimaginable as the decade began." (Keller 2021). He goes on to provide a detailed series of consecutive and concurrent roles that senior leaders, including CEOs must adopt; pointing to not only the flux of leadership but its multi-faceted nature. For the benefit of this report the connection is via his analysis that "Just as we need to understand the drivers of institutional success and failure, we need too to recognise the multiple pressures on leaders, acknowledging that healthy institutions depend on healthy leaders." This report directly tackles the understanding of health in leadership.

A further report providing vital context was recently compiled by Professor Ewart Keep, Tom Richmond, Director of education think tank EDSK, and Dame Ruth Silver, President of FETL. *Honourable Histories* surveys 30 years of changes and impacts in FE from 1991 on. It provides a useful timeline of policy churn in further education, from the local management of colleges through incorporation to the present day, while also looking ahead to the next phase of development and the factors shaping the current policy scene.

The 2019 report by Matt O'Leary et al considering the role of leadership in improving teaching and learning provides a detailed summary of leadership within further education highlighting the context of "policy churn over the last quarter century provides vital contextual framework" (O'Leary 2019). The report goes onto highlight key influences of marketization, mergers and takeovers, and the introduction of business cultures describing "the model of leadership as being characteristic of neo-liberal and corporate interpretations of the role… the privileging of entrepreneurial business cultures is reflected in recent changes to nomenclature, as many principals have taken title of chief executive." The work goes on to highlight the dominant role of finance within the CEO role following austerity measures and reduction of government expenditure.

For the context of this report all these works highlight the systematic tensions and potential conflicts within the principal/CEO role (in fact the immediacy of one in appellation alone is obvious). Once again the context we must take from all these works is that the externalities that modern principal/CEO of colleges must face create an environment that is both challenging, fast paced and creating increasing pressure which may have an impact on health, wellbeing and overall levels of distress.

Covid

This research has been conducted through the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst this might amplify results around distress, none of the questions asked participants directly about COVID as it is not a stated research theme. The impacts of COVID to the operations and strategies within colleges and ergo the leadership challenges cannot, and should not, be ignored or considered marginal. It is problematic to decouple major external incidents from individual results without further study and this must be accepted as one of the limitations of this work and also another context within which the report places itself.

The Role of researcher

The role of researcher must be acknowledged as potential source for bringing inherent bias into this study. The author is a serving principal within the FE sector with a national reputation for contributing to work on wellbeing and mental health. He has presented and written on many occasions on issues related to leadership and wellbeing and stress. He holds a post of Senior Visiting Fellow of Leadership and Management at the University of Suffolk and works as a coach on the topic of wellbeing and performance. As such whilst this study has been conducted and presented in many ways as objective, following the literature and data collected from primary research, it must be identified that a subjectivity may have influence in both the design of the study and emphasis of reporting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on stress, distress and workplace distress is far reaching and a wide canon of work. Within the confines of this report key reviews have been selected with a purpose of providing an informed platform to determine the research methodology within this research and augment reader understanding closely associated with the themes and research aims. It is not intended to be comprehensive and readers can further their knowledge through use of the bibliography.

Distress Explored

Distress is a feature of everyday life and certainly every day work life but it is the extent to which the amount of pressure, the sustained nature of that pressure along with its frequency that begins to become important.

Stress has been described by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them". Although distress itself is not a disease, it is recognised that excessive or prolonged distress can be a cause of mental and physical illness.

HSE research has found that one in five people – an estimated five million workers – is 'very' or 'extremely' stressed at work, and that stress, anxiety and depression nationally lead to more than 11.5 million lost working days each year. The International Labour Organisation has estimated that the cost of stress to the British economy amounts to more than 10 percent of its gross national product (GNP).

In the next few paragraphs we explore the different aspects of stress identified in the literature. There are a variety of definitions of stress and distress but most conform to suggestions of interaction between external environment and the individual. "The generally accepted definition today is one of interaction between the situation and the individual. It is the psychological and physical state that results when the resources of the individual are not sufficient to cope with the demands and pressures of the situation. Thus, stress is more likely in some situations than others and in some individuals than others. Stress can undermine the achievement of goals, both for individuals and for organisations" Mitchie (2001)

Ultimately if distress is continued then there is a negative impact on overall wellbeing. "Well-being, which refers to optimal psychological experience and functioning" (Deco 2008).

"Well-being is considered subjective because the idea is for people to evaluate for themselves, in a general way, the degree to which they experience a sense of wellness. As an operational definition, SWB is most often interpreted to mean experiencing a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative effect, and a high degree of satisfaction with one's life."

The literature points to the increasing likelihood of burnout whilst in a CEO role. Research points to external factors relating to increased marketization and competition, progressively complex government regulations, and recurring or unpredictable economic conditions. In a world within the leadership literature that has been described as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) then those operating at senior level within organisations, including colleges, may be increasingly susceptible to burnout. According to literature, burnout is "a psychological response to chronic work stress resulting from a combination of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced personal accomplishment, and reduced professional efficacy" (Cords and Dougherty, 1993; Halbesleben, 2006; Jackson et al.,1986).

College principal/CEOs experience persistent demands from diverse stakeholders to improve performance impose substantial stressors on CEOs, and frequent, intense, and unpredictable interactions. Research by Serena (2018) considers that "Additionally, non-contingent rewards and punishments resulting from systematic and firm-specific factors driving firm performance may further contribute to the reduced sense of personal accomplishments and depersonalization among executives Meaning that the operating context within colleges and external influences connected to performance, such as OFSTED, FE Commissioner/PMO, ESFA financial frameworks, alongside LEPs and local considerations will influence or in some cases compound the self-actualising or personal achievements that principals/CEOs may have enjoyed in the past with greater autonomy and self-efficacy.

"In the case of CEOs, job burnout occurs from recurring patterns of job stress and additional job elements, such as the influence of external factors that reduce effort-outcome correlation (i.e., non-contingent rewards), increasing expectations, changing demands, and dynamic resource-performance relationships—all aspects typical of the CEO role. Work-related stress occurs when job demands exceed a person's abilities, whereas burnout refers to an individual's response patterns to work stressors" (Shirom, 1989).

Cary Cooper, the leading academic in the UK over the past two decades in stress and founder of "Good Day at Work" Robertson- Cooper research explores the concept of burnout and CEO susceptibility. Whilst this research was not within the further education sector and mostly outside of education the read across is clear.

"As well as considering an alternative life style, 25 per cent of European CEOs believed they were at substantial risk of job burnout (physical and emotional exhaustion). Surprisingly, we found that the younger executives were more likely to express these concerns, i.e. 34 per cent of those aged 50 or less perceived a high risk of job burnout, compared to only 18 per cent of CEOs aged 50 plus. Either they were more willing to admit their fears; or perhaps they are acknowledging that they still have to face many years of maintaining life at the top. When you are at the top, there is only one direction in which to go if success is not sustained" (Cooper 1992).

The place of work-life balance is increasingly important within the literature relating to distress and long term impact. A key factor is the length of the working day. "he surveys found that two-thirds of CEOs worked about 12 hours each day; some up to 16 hours a day. "(Cooper 1992)

Research by Cooper (1992) suggests that work-life balance issue is becoming increasingly important to CEOS. "Twice as many British CEOs are now worried about interpersonal relations at work, and in life generally. The family has now become the crunch issue. We hear increasingly of top executives, senior politicians and many other prominent people in the European public eye concerned about the effects of their life style on their family life." (Cooper 1992)

Mitchie (2001) suggested that the physical and emotion impact of stress are important to understand in both short term and long term. Signs of stress can often be seen in people's behaviour, especially in changes in behaviour. There are a variety of responses. Acute responses to stress may be in the areas of feelings (for example, anxiety, depression, irritability, fatigue) or through behavioural response (for example, being withdrawn, aggressive, tearful, unmotivated), or thinking/cognitive response (difficulties of concentration and problem solving) or physical symptoms.

"If stress persists, there are changes in neuroendocrine, cardiovascular, autonomic and immunological functioning, leading to mental and physical ill health (for example anxiety, depression, heart disease)". (Mitchie 2002)

Mitchie (2002) goes onto to report that "Unclear work or conflicting roles and boundaries can cause stress, as can having responsibility for people. The possibilities for job development are important buffers against current stress, with under promotion, lack of training, and job insecurity being stressful. There are two other sources of stress, or buffers against stress: relationships at work, and the organisational culture. Managers who are critical, demanding, unsupportive or bullying create stress, whereas a positive social dimension of work and good team working reduces it."

The design of the primary research and this report uses the five pillars from the work of Mitchie (2002) that identified key influencers on stress (and the creation of potential distress). The design also draws on Cooper (1992) in the work on perceptions of pressure and sources of strain. These are:

- long hours worked,
- work overload and pressure
- the effects on personal lives
- lack of control over work and lack of participation in decision making
- poor social support
- unclear management and work role and poor management style.

It is worth reflecting momentarily that the literature on distress does describe that there are individual differences in both the stresses people face and the extent to which they have an effect. Within this report there is insufficient scope to go into these nuances other than to state that different people will

demonstrate different wellbeing and functioning depending on context and personal characteristics. For the benefit of this report, in many respects, our sample (college CEOs) are through virtue of being in similar roles have similarity and share operational context. However, we might allow for nuance and will report different experiences of self-reported stress (or distress).

Employees show various symptoms and signs when continuously confronted with a stressful environment (Bickford, 2005). However, not all symptoms occur at once, but appear in different phases as reported by Annscheutz (1999). Focussing on the potential sources of occupational stress, Murphy (1995) composes a typology of stressors especially in the workplace. These are, among others, the factors unique to the job, role in the organisation, career development, individual characteristics and relationships at work.

Another model trying to explain the causes of occupational stress is the demand control- support model (Karasek, 1979). This model holds that the tasks the employee has to perform (job demands) and the perceived degree of control they hold over the job demands (job control) account for the degree of stress at work. The highest amount of stress at work is expected in situations with high demands and low control (Karasek, 1979).

There are two kinds of responses to stress; either a negative one, or 'distress', or a positive one, 'eustress'. Tomaka (1993) found out, that eustress, the positive stress response, leads to many positive outcomes on both subjective and objective performance as well as on adaptive domains.

Hans Selye (1950) defined stress as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change". For the purposes of this study this is the definition that has been adopted to share with participants.

It is important to notice, that stress can lead to both positive and negative stress responses. The stress response is the actual reaction to the "perceived stressor", which can be perceived either as distress or eustress. Since it is very subjective, which situations are perceived as stressors and because of the many different ways how to appraise and to cope with these. There are many differences among individuals. These subjective cognitive factors and situational factors determine differences in the stress response (Le Fevre et al., 2003). An example of a stress response is the fight-or-flight reaction, first described by Cannon as far back as the 1920s, which is a survival mechanism helping to react quickly to threatening situations. The individual fights the threat or flees into safety.

DISTRESS WITHIN EDUCATION

Whilst there is limited research within the FE sector but there have been studies within other parts of the education system particularly related to secondary leadership. This should be recognised as a different sector with different strains but it can be useful to read across to FE in lieu of research (to temporarily fill the gap). Greany & Higham (2018) concluded that "our current educational landscape since (DFE, 2010) has become 'chaotic' and that school leaders are confused, threatened and don't always agree with the direction of policy being delivered by the government." This certainly ties closely with the other publications by FETL previously referred to.

The literature also refers to the work/life balance issue suggesting that Head teachers are working on average of 51-60 hours per week. (Savill-Smith (2018) and also Darmody and Smyth (2014) found that experience levels of less than 3 years were directly linked to increased levels of stress adding that in general, principals are likely to experience their highest levels of stress between the ages of 30-50 due to other family and home related pressures. There appears to be a well-represented notion that the work/life boundaries are increasingly porous. Savill-Smith (2018) found that 74% of teachers and school leaders struggled to switch off and relax and 65% of the 1502 surveyed said they do not find enough time to be with friends and family.

In 2018, research conducted by Leeds Beckett University found that the majority of teachers surveyed (77 per cent) felt that poor teacher mental health was having a detrimental effect on pupils' progress. 94 per cent said that their classroom energy levels dropped when they were suffering poor mental health and nearly as many said they were less creative during these times. Of those surveyed, more than half said that they experienced poor mental health.

Previous research has indicated high levels of work-related stress in the teaching profession (Travers, 1996; Johnson et al, 2005). While there has been a fair degree

of research on teacher stress, there has been far less on Head teacher stress. However, one recent self-report study investigating the prevalence and causes of stress amongst Head teachers in West Sussex (Phillips et al, 2007) found 43% of the sample reporting work related stress, higher levels compared to other recent studies of UK workers. A follow-up study (Phillips, 2008) looking at risk factors for work related stress and health in Head teachers found that they had poor physical and mental health when compared to a general population of workers.

Research from the higher education sector also identifies a similar list cited above as being key to physiological and psychological wellbeing in the workplace. These include work relationships and support, overload, control, security, work life balance and pay. Sang, Teo and Cooper (2013) suggested that "The academic profession has long been highly respected and higher education institutions have been viewed as secure workplaces in both the East and the West. However, following extensive reforms of the higher educational systems in many countries, work stress in higher education institutions has recently attracted increasing attention from researchers (Gillespie *et al*., 2001; Winefield *et al*., 2003; Tytherleigh *et al*., 2005). They went onto state that "A three-year study in 14 British universities revealed that staff stress was significantly higher than in normative data" (Gillespie 2001).

WORKPLACE STRESS AND THE LAW

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 employers have a general duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health of their employees at work. This includes taking steps to make sure they do not suffer stress-related illness as a result of their work. The statutory regime supplements the 'common law' obligations on employers to provide reasonably safe working environments for their employees.

Employers also have a specific duty under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to undertake risk assessments that seek to identify and eliminate or reduce risks to their employees' health, safety and welfare.

Stress is one of the risks to health, safety and welfare that must be assess. Local authorities, governing bodies, multi-academy trusts and all other employers of teachers must:

- Consider the risk of stress among their workforce
- Take steps to remove the risk
- Where removal of the risk is not possible, reduce the risk by any necessary changes in working practices or by introducing appropriate protective or supportive measures.

Further, employers have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments to the working conditions of teachers suffering from certain stress-related illnesses, such as mental illness.adjustments to the working conditions of teachers suffering from certain stress-related illnesses, such as mental illness.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The philosophical orientation adopted in this research study was that of a pragmatic or critical realist. The pragmatic or critical realist approach, as described by Robson (2002), empowers the researcher to draw from different research paradigms. A research design that captured qualitative and quantitative data was thought to be best given the real world, open system in which the research was being carried out. This study involved the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data and was therefore within the mixed methods paradigm (Creswell and Clark, 2003). Adopting a mixed method enabled findings to be triangulated between survey and interviews.

The survey was designed drawing directly from themes identified within the literature (Mitchie 2001, Cooper 1997) to create distress, but also drew questions from established stress perception survey methodologies. Stress risk assessment questionnaires are a well-established tool used in employment settings. Questions were derived from Management Standards Indicator Toll produced by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

An important consideration was that the questionnaire used did not take too long to complete. The intent was to be able to advise participants that the questionnaire would take approximately five minutes to complete. The questionnaire was sent via JiscMail (a closed network service only accessible by serving principal/ceos). It was via a survey monkey format which collated results. Within the introduction a definition of stress was provided based on established definitions by Seyle (1976).

For participants following the interview survey design, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 principals out of 12 invited to participate. It was chosen to recruit the participants via convenience sampling, which is the most economical and easiest sampling method for this study (Ferber, 1977). All participants were people belonging to the social environment of the researcher. Inclusion criteria of participation were that participants had to be currently serving principals. A range was selected based on creating gender balance and length of service as principal.

It was chosen to conduct semi- structured interviews in order to give the participants freedom for creativity in their responses (Longhurst, 2016). The interview contained open questions to different topics covering experiences of distress and experience of work. The interviews were very discursive in approach with themes followed if introduced by the interviewee.

The researcher generated these questions based on existing theoretical insights about the topic rather broadly to avoid suggestive manipulation of the responses. In the first section of the interview, an explanation of both distress based on earlier literature research and the aims of this study were communicated to the participant and checked for understanding. Analysis was through combining responses from the quantitative survey with thematic description in the interviews. No labelling or coding systems were adopted for ease.

The role of researcher must be acknowledged as a potential source for bringing inherent bias into the study. He is a serving principal within the FE sector with a national reputation around wellbeing and mental health. As such whilst this study has been conducted and presented in many ways as objective, following the data, it must be identified that subjectivity may have influenced the design of the study and emphasis.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the study's key findings, drawing on the research data taken from both the online survey and semi structured interviews; all respondents were principals currently within the FE sector. The aim is to develop key themes or threads that run through both the data and triangulated through interviews, alongside highlighting any conflicting findings.

There were 8 long-form semi structured interviews across serving principals with a balance of gender, length of service in role and size of college. This sample should be considered representative. If further work was completed, then a larger sample could be used to ensure a broader coverage sufficient to draw conclusions. As such no conclusions will be drawn in this study against characteristics other than that of being a serving principal.

There were 82 respondents to the online survey, run through a survey monkey format issued via Jisc Mail network to principals. This represents well over a third of the sector and is considered therefore a statistically very significant sample. It is worth noting that demographic data was not collected, nor analysed. Future research projects might seek to provide more detailed analysis. Within the scope of this report the intention is to create a high level analysis to support the development of future studies in this area. As such no conclusions at that level of granularity will be drawn.

Through the reporting in this section the 'voice' of leaders will be used from both the semi- structured interviews and through the qualitative or long form answers within the online survey. These voices are particularly powerful and had a great deal of congruence and alignment in what they reported.

It is worth reflecting momentarily on the context of this survey work. That is to say it has been conducted through the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst this might amplify results around distress none of the questions asked participants directly about COVID. In many responses COVID was referenced but only as illustration of crisis leadership rather than direct cause of the overall position. It is problematic to decouple major external incidents from individual results without further study and this must be accepted as one of the limitations of this work. However, many

respondents reporting that there is constant policy flux and crisis operations is a normal state within FE (Keep, Richmond, Silver 2021)

Furthermore, regardless of the cause these findings within the report should be taken in absolute terms rather than comparative or proportional terms. That is to say, principals are reporting being distressed and this impacts upon their work and family life. This is critical to our understanding of the role and points to a crisis of leadership, which is a powerful finding and should be of deep concern to our sector. Many of the findings can demonstrate that distress is not fully pervasive across the sector but, importantly, is prevalent and directly affecting a significant proportion of serving principals. As such this is worth further investigation and amelioration through enhanced policy and practice interventions at individual, corporation and sector level.

Throughout the findings section the most important part, indeed the most important objective of this whole research report, is to facilitate the voice of principals to be heard. Principals, as you might expect, provided rich, complex, reflective responses. This area of leadership research has not been completed in the sector before. Providing a voice for leaders to provide their comments will provide authentic commentary on the topic of distress in leadership and furthermore allow us, as researchers and readers, to bear witness to the difficulties inherent within the principal's role.

Participants within the online survey and interview were provided with a definition of distress as defined by Hans Selye (1976): a "state of overload, for example overextension at work, thus negative stress".

Interviewees were asked to provide their own definitions of distress. Common language used included references to being out of control or feeling overwhelmed where internal acuity and reserves were unable to cope. One principal described it as a "position where you can't healthily absorb any more pressure".

Through the interviews wide and open conversations were had about distress, frequency and situations that created stress. All interviewees reported that distress was a regular part of the everyday role of principalship with more than two using the same language that distress had "ebbs and flows" but recognised that situations of high levels of distress were becoming more frequent. The common theme within interviews related to control and the loss of self-agency. Principals all reported a willingness to take decisions but where expectations were felt to be unreasonable or situations were externally dictated then distress was higher.

45% of those surveyed experienced distress 3-5 times per week. With an additional 10% suggesting the occurrences were over 5 times. This indicates that stress is ever present for most principals within the role and occurs with high frequency and regularity.

57% identified that the demands of the work within standard hours of work was imbalanced although 39% either thought the work was possible within the hours or were neutral in view. This raises further question to understand what standard hours might really mean and further investigation into what makes some principals able to work within their defined hours whilst others do not.

The vast majority of principals reported they were able to fulfil the tasks and responsibilities of the role. This was unpacked further in later questions and the interviews to understand at what "cost" or what is forgone to fulfil the role completely.

As the literature above highlights, control is important factor is reducing distress. Almost 60% of principals reported they do have control over the pace of work. 95% reported having clarity of role. This was supported through interviews, and the ability to set and control one's own work in terms of pace and focus is identified as one of the key benefits to the seniority of the role. Through interviews clarity of purpose was apparent from all those interviewed which was delivered with passion and clarity of vision, even if at a personal cost. Further research could be conducted to identify the follow on effects of the principal/CEO setting the beat for the oars to follow for other roles that fall outside the scope of this research.

The vast majority, at 77% of participants, felt that enough support was provided from chairs of corporation. However, through interviews this relationship was unpacked in more detail and found to be one that was complex. It held intrinsic difficulty and tension between the support for operational and strategic matters of the college but not directly supportive of the wellbeing or overall stress of the principals. All recognised the role of chair was important in relation to stress. With one participants saying" I am lucky, I have a brilliant chair. We have developed mutual trust." Whilst others suggested that the relationship was 'strictly business' and "I would never talk to him about how I am feeling".

Counter to this support was the question of hours worked. Some reporting from principals who felt pressurised to working long hours (34%). Only 7% of principals reported working a 40-hour week, with 36% working between 55-65 hours and 20% working over 65 hours. Over a quarter stating they were not supported through emotionally demanding work. Whilst principals might choose to work these hours a conclusion must be that excessive hours and a long hour's culture is pervasive and, in some cases, expected to fulfil the role. In these circumstances a hypothesis can be made: sufficient rest and relaxation is forgone with excessive hours over a prolonged period unsuitable for health and wellbeing. Secondly, a hypothesis could be suggested that a long hours culture starts 'from the top' and expectations further down the reporting line could create negative impacts in the wider staff body. This would need further investigation and was outside the scope but is worth reflecting upon.

Interviewees were asked about how distress manifested itself for individuals. Participants were mostly in agreement that there were physical symptoms that often went unnoticed for long periods. These included periods of lost sleep, physical tells of anxiety, musculo-skeletal issues and appetite loss/gain. There were differences in how these were used by interviewees, for some they were triggers to change behaviour whilst others spent time in denial. The psychological and emotion factors were clearly reported with interviewees describing changing behaviours ranging from becoming more light hearted "I hide behind becoming more jokey" through to increased anger, frustration and emotional outbursts. "I become more emotionally visible". The theme of control was once again prevalent in these discussions as being a trigger: "emotional control is my weakness" and lack of control can "make you feel like a victim". Overall, interviewees felt that their recognition of the symptoms of stress was improving even if intervention didn't follow; with one participant saying that she had "been on a journey of introspection recently". These feelings were described as amplified by COVID but not exclusively caused by them and were seen as long term issues in the role.

The role of senior staff in supporting principal distress was more mixed with 64% agreeing there was enough support from senior colleagues, whilst over a third were neutral or disagreed. Some interviewees reported the role of the principals was to offer up a 'workface' which precluded them from seeking support; whilst others reported feeling it wasn't the role of senior staff to support principal distress reduction. Some interviewees held great stock in the support of senior staff but articulated it from a perspective of operational delivery not emotional support. If senior staff were delivering good operational outcomes this reduced, by proxy, distress experienced by the principal. Where this was not the case distress was increased. Whilst this might seem initially an obvious finding it does point to the importance of teams within colleges at senior level and the link between performance of that team and potential distress of leaders.

These senior relationships are often complex and nuanced. Around a third of those surveyed reported they would not talk to colleagues about work related problems. This was amplified further by interviewees suggesting that principals can easily become isolated if support is not provided or sought elsewhere. All principals interviewed would welcome further support; with some finding working with coaches or mentors was of benefit whilst all reported some form of seeking peer support, although this was informally arranged and outside of the supervision or instruction of the college.

Through interviews the theme of public presentation was very strong. Several participants talked about being on a 'pedestal' and in 'public view'. "as CEO everyone is looking and judging" another saying "I am on the tightrope and people are waiting for me to fall". The gaze of 'others' which included staff, media and intervention regimes alongside an implied schadenfreude of other sector leaders increased pressure through observation. Only one interview enjoyed the performative aspect of the role, actively seeking opportunities to "take to the stage" and recognising this as a part of their positive eustress within the role. There was a challenge to the "heroic" leader, with some criticisms that principals could often be guilty of self-promotion and" displaying their peacock feathers" which could lead to negative reflections of their own performance; further, participants explored the theme as to whether there was a space for the 'introverted CEO'.

Conflicting responsibilities within the principal role was a key theme leading to distress. 71% of principles identified conflicts. This was supported strongly through interviews. Conflicts were often reported in a "X versus Y" format, although others identified the huge built-in complexities within college landscape and tensions.

The top conflicts identified through the report were:

- Finance vs quality
- Being a CEO vs principal

- Maintaining positive staff culture versus workloads and efficiency
- Home life versus needs of the role
- Conflicts brought on by external accountability requirements
- Wishing to meet student need versus government mandated requirements.

The reflected voice of principals amplified these themes further directly:

"Most are negotiable with ways forward that can resolve those conflicts. The one that has been difficult this year is the obvious one: Under COVID - maximising keeping staff (their families and communities) safe, and maximising engagement and attainment for learners."

"Managing the needs of the students, staff and institution within the available ever-decreasing budget. This is compounded by the threatening nature of the Commissioner's office and Ofsted. I'm to blame if something goes wrong? Additionally, the genuine needs of the students and the ever-changing demands of those with white glove control. For example, ESFA, DfE & OFS (there are many more!)"

"The tension between aiming to spend time, thought, effort and precious time on education, people, learners and the role we play, yet spending disproportionate amount of time on matters of finance, making ends meet, and "hustling" for whatever income source may be next."

"Finances and balancing the books is important, of course, however takes up too much of my time and energy, and leaves me exposed to the will and capriciousness of others."

"The role has three parts: CEO - external world, Principal - internal world and Accounting Officer- regulatory world. The demands of these three aspects don't always sit in balance as they start from different places."

"Looking after my staff/manager welfare and workloads vs keeping staff deployment high and the college financially stable. To keep financially stable we don't pay what staff/managers deserve and we have too few staff/managers to make workloads reasonable."

It was obvious from comments and interviews that these tensions created their own pressure within the principal role and created emotional, behavioural and physical responses of distress.

The survey asked principals to name the top three causes of distress. The causes reported would appear, at first glance, to be obvious to any reader aware of the sector but they were described with great clarity and explicit statement by principals as directly causing distress. They can be summarised as:

- Managing Conflicts between various pressures (outlined through early question)
- Threat of sanction
- Leading through uncertainty
- Constant changing of policy and regulation
- Frequent crisis management
- College finances where many outcomes were out of direct control
- Feeling of helplessness combined with responsibility
- Pressure caused through public perception and media.

Comments directly from the survey included:

"national reform, under-funding, lack of skilled staff"

"Changing regulatory requirements, staffing shortages, the responsibility of the role"

"trying to manage/implement incoherent govt policy concern about staff wellbeing, particularly currently in the pandemic ever increasing"

"demands for compliance, data, funding audits etc. including as a result of devolution."

"Latest government agendas that have not been thought through".

"Leading a college that has a high degree of uncertainty about its future, which leads to very negative press coverage which creates emotion and anxiety in me and in my colleagues. This leadership challenge not being recognised in anyway during Ofsted visits….. Unrealistic demands from external bodies like the ESFA/OFS made in hectoring tones with threats of sanctions for not doing what they want."

"Money, money ..... and money."

"Being helpless when you can see what needs to be done to help someone or a group but the system does not allow you - Having to operate in an environment that does not align with your values - Having to implement policies that you know will not deliver their policy intentions."

"Tiredness/mental exhaustion from keeping the 'performance' on the go all the time - feel obligated (and I do this willingly) to be permanently upbeat to ensure staff are feeling supported."

"I don't feel I exhibit distress (if defined as extreme anxiety, sorrow or pain?). However, there are things that concern me - for example, being responsible for people's lives (whether that be ensuring good outcomes, managing finance to pay people etc...). Some of the bureaucracy and accountability can cause stress and concern also."

"Needing to play the perfect game all the time as there is no margin of error."

"inconsistent messages and initiatives from DfE/Gov/ESFA. Lack of understanding of the sector and nature of work from regulatory/governing bodies. Makes implementation sometimes impossible and is always difficult."

Throughout the interviews there was congruence with the survey findings. Interviews also reported that regularity frameworks and "perverse unachievable targets" created additional pressure. Other triggers and causes for stress were described when 'reserves are low" with many of the interviews describing that the impacts were based on unsustainable levels of pressure for too long.

When asked about the relationship between principal distress and the wider team and college staff there was a range of rich responses. This question drew out three broad responses. Firstly, it isn't directly connected and principals worked hard and proactively to "keep this away from staff' and "hide it". Secondly, there was no perceived impact. Thirdly, reporting of noticeable impact. Overall this area would provide an important area for a future academic study. At this stage within this report the author felt that allowing the voice of principals to be highlighted provided a powerful insight into the pressures. Without a doubt, the most common response was one of "hiding" or protection of staff and other leaders from the pressure of the principal. At this stage it is hard to draw conclusion as to whether these tactics support wider college staff, increase pressure on the leader, or create an inauthentic presentation but with the most positive of intentions. Interviewees referred frequently in different language to" the mask" or" being on the stage" or "on the tightrope" (the quote after whom this study is named). One interviewee described the "work mask as essential" going onto say that "is a polished version of me, but authentic so I don't get exhausted".

The responses within the survey were brutally honest and demonstrated that there were impacts beyond the principal/CEO as a result of their distress.

"I try and manage my stress away from my staff although my direct colleagues do see changes in my moods. It manifests within me through poor sleep, health issues and changes to my attitude towards work."

"I hope I am good at hiding it!"

"I hope not too much as we are a strong leadership team who trust and rely on each other, and share the concerns. We laugh a lot. Sometimes it feels we have to make too quick decisions and don't have enough time to weigh them properly, and sometimes it's hard to find the time to explain properly to staff about why decisions are made as they are and keep them fully informed."

"less time to support, nurture and coach team/colleagues, more irritable, than usual, making key decisions too quickly, being less pro-active than normal and more reactive, making more (avoidable) mistakes, taking on other peoples' pressure whilst still trying to avoid upward delegation."

"Not under very much, but my reaction to stress is a lack of trust, a turn towards forensic search for the root cause of under-performance (rather than providing better leadership), and a brusqueness in tone that often does not have the desired effect of motivating people to change their behavior!"

"I try hard not to pass on any stress that I feel. I am sure that this is not always achieved."

"I think it can. I try hard to find ways to alleviate the stress that I am under through work and also out of work (exercise, talking to key friends/family, doing things I enjoy) to keep things in perspective and to remember this is a worthwhile job that has a positive impact for the community. It's hard but worth it! Also relationships

with other principals to whom I can talk openly and share issues with. I'm fortunate that the city I work in has a collaborative education group of schools and colleges, which tries to ensure we collaborate and support each other. It's not perfect, but it's really helpful and this year during the pandemic has been very important."

"I think I'm pretty good at modeling a calm and controlled exterior. Occasionally this cracks under pressure and frustration (only close colleagues ever see it) and some colleagues find it hard to accept that I'm human. I am very hard on myself and don't take enough time to celebrate success (of myself and others) as I'm too busy worrying about the things that aren't right yet or could go wrong."

"For the avoidance of doubt, I don't think I'm under distress. Where there are pressure points, and all jobs have these, they are managed. Whatever pressures I'm under are not communicated wider to staff"

"I think I hide it well, however the pressures do cascade down and you can see the immense pressures they in turn suffer from."

"I try to hide any distress from the majority of staff because I feel duty bound to try and provide a positive framework / culture to work in. My immediate colleagues see warts and all and I guess on one hand it empowers them to express themselves as well. On the other hand, it could cause concern / anxiety."

"I am conscious of protecting other staff from any negative emotion I may feel, however I may make short timescale demands in order to achieve external deadlines. The effect on myself impacts outside of work in terms of fatigue and a lack of time to ensure a balance with family and hobbies for wellbeing."

"It is bound to impact as I am conscious that I need to set the tone for the organization and my colleagues. So therefore, it is important that I am constantly aware of how stress may be visible to colleagues."

"not visible to others so far as I am aware but makes me less fun to be with at home sometimes - too tired to speak at times."

"I do my best to hide it. Realistically I know that on occasion it has made me a little sharp with colleagues and at home at times, I think it has worn down my patience and resilience. After 25 years in the sector it also makes me consider what else I could do with my career. I hope I am a good Principal, I try to do my best by my staff and students, but the pace and workload is brutal. I can't place any more on my teams - we are juggling like crazy and I'm afraid we will drop something critical."

"I try to do my best to avoid "passing stress forward" but I also want to ensure that I am being honest and open to my senior team. I talk about mental health and wellbeing a lot and try to make discussing it normal at the college".

"I am not personally distressed. I am not sure if I have a high tolerance for stress? I tend to be very "even" and balanced which I believe has a positive effect on my colleagues."

"I don't feel especially distressed, but I see it as my responsibility not to transmit stress or distress to my team, as they have enough of their own! If I can help them to manage the pressures on them, and they perform better, my own stress levels are reduced. The main effect on me of ongoing low level stress is poor sleep."

"I do not suffer from stress personally as I have excellent ways of dealing with it and coping with everything effectively without detriment to my health. I believe this helps others cope."

It is important to note that some principals, whilst in the minority, in comments expressed having sufficient coping strategies to not get stressed nor pass on distress.

This was a theme explored through interviews as was the 'cost' of being in the role for a long period and what coping strategies were employed to mitigate distress. In all the interviewees there was the articulation of a change of coping strategies to deal with distress. These ranged from exercise based interventions, social interventions and belonging to community groups, spending time with the family.

Many described the ability to compartmentalise and draw strict barriers around the work role. One interviewee had strict self-imposed rules around annual leave and was "not prepared to give up my private time". They described a reflective practice where they had defined what the 'deal breakers' were in maintaining the role (particular related to family) and understood the need for balanced life to be able to sustain for long periods in the principal role. They said that "not enough people asked themselves what are they prepared to give?" whilst others described the role as" all pervasive and consuming".

The interviewees were split around the impact on family life. There was some striking reporting of stories when looking to family impact with one participant describing "I take greater care of the kids at college than those at home", another saying that they had missed significant proportions of seeing their families grow up due to work commitments. Work-life balance was often affected and relied on understanding families with acknowledgement that often work went into home regularly; although one principal was clear that division was strictly made saying "it's not my family's problem, home is my retreat and it isn't their job to deal with my stress". Several of the principals described not just long hours but reported by the online survey but "I never stop thinking about work- it's all or nothing, I can't do it half hearted. It's more than that"; another principal stated "I don't remember a weekend or holiday when I'm not thinking about work".

Longer term impacts of stress were discussed as to whether or not the role was sustainable in the long run. There was a mixture of opinion. All participants acknowledged that there is a 'cost of being a principal'. Often the costs described aligned to the literature on long term impacts of stress being played out in mental health, physical health, family/home disruption. That said, all participants described in their own ways a high sense of purpose and a job worth doing. Distress was an accepted part of the role but was a cost of "being able to do some good".

The role of eustress was briefly explored in some interviews and it was acknowledged that principals experienced positive stress. Often it was reported the natural characterises of principals are people who have high levels of resilience or gravitate towards difficult work. Also, three of the interviewees described that they worked better under high stress or crisis conditions. Further studies into eustress in the future would be beneficial to getting a more complete picture.

Despite some of the reporting outlined above there are high levels of satisfaction with principals providing 7.9 out of 10 in overall satisfaction. This is encouraging for the sector: whilst distress is high, perceptions remain that the role is providing satisfaction then retention of college principals is likely to be high.

MOVING INTO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations derived from the research and findings are presented at three levels: individual, corporation and sector.

Recommendations to CEOs

There are a range of interventions coming from the research that principal/CEOS can engage in where responsibility rests with them. These could be proposed as:

1. Develop deeper understanding of the literature around distress to enable more informed discussions and participate in formal training around leadership and wellbeing.
2. Create a self-care prescription against the key areas of stressors identified to create sustainable working behaviours.
3. Develop peer support networks to allow authentic engagement and mutual support.
4. Hold discussions with corporation chairs around duty of care and how college corporations can support healthier work-life balance and workload.
5. Engage further with senior staff around the issues of stress/distress to encourage a culture of openness where wellbeing and mental health are topics that are regularly discussed.
6. Consider bringing support external into college to provide safe support such as a professional performance coaches or formal mentoring programmes.

Recommendations to College Corporations

1. Engage with principal/CEOs to ensure that workloads are reasonable and sustainable. That principals have a wellbeing support package which could include self-care plans, coaching and/or mentoring and training in wellbeing.

2. The wellbeing of senior staff should be considered routinely as part of governance review.
3. Ensure that impact assessments are understood through the lens of leadership wellbeing when corporate strategy is agreed.

Recommendations to the Sector

1. Further research funding should be sought/ provided to investigate more deeply the impacts of distress in various leadership roles for the FE sector.
2. Training should be provided to leaders in identifying and proactively managing distress. Training should be provided to college corporations governing bodies on how to manage duty of care for senior post holders. This could be by enhancing existing leadership development programmes.
3. Funded coaching programmes could develop to provide private and safe external support networks for leaders.
4. Policy makers are encouraged to consider impact assessments in relation to wellbeing for staff working in colleges ahead of deployment.
5. The regulatory regime should be reviewed by senior officials and college representative bodies to ensure that unnecessary or unsustainable pressure is imposed through performance frameworks or the culture of their execution.

CLOSING REMARKS

The aim of this report was to discover the current extent of distress within the population of practising principals/CEOs. The report discovered high levels of frequent distress that was increasing. Common triggers for distress were identified with many associated with the unintended consequences of a policy landscape that is in constant flux and chaotically disrupted by inadequate funding or poor execution. Some leaders had proactive approaches about self-care either formally or informally but these were inadequate to ensure long term sustainability in role. There was a clearly identified broader long term impact of distress.

It is the author's belief that distress is a very real and dangerous consideration within the FE sector and affects all roles. From this research it is proven that distress is currently impacting principals. There is insufficient consideration given to distress by individuals adopting self-care, the colleges as institutions ensuring that principals operate under a duty of care, from a legal and moral perspective, and that the sector through policy is creating the conditions that allows, and in many cases, promotes higher distress for leaders.

Effective leadership cannot function properly if leaders are unwell or under unsustainable conditions. For some leaders this is being currently viewed simply as a "cost" of the role and to some degree is offset by sense of purpose and civic duty associated with senior public service. However, the research from literature and this research demonstrates that the impact on short and long term wellbeing cannot be offset and is likely to hold danger and real costs from emotional, physical and psychological perspectives. This impacts on the culture and performance of colleges which can only be detrimental when extrapolated to the sector as a whole.

It is considered long overdue that urgent interventions must be sought to reduce, if not eradicate, harmful distress factors through care, support, dialogue, and improved policy.

The voices from the tightrope are getting stronger and clearer than ever on this issue……but sadly the tightrope is getting thinner and the fall more perilous.

Stuart Rimmer

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