Inspiring leaders to
improve children's lives

National College
for School Leadership

System leadership among headteachers

Key findings from a 2009-10 research programme

Resource

Contents

Executive summary

A programme of research among headteachers was undertaken between December 2009 and April 2010 with the overall aim of helping the National College for School Leadership (National College) develop its leadership development support for system leaders, ie leaders who work beyond their own school to support other schools. The research consisted of three phases:

— A qualitative phase of 20 depth interviews exploring attitudes, perceptions and behaviour among current and potential system leaders.

— An initial quantitative phase of 1,092 telephone interviews primarily to understand how many headteachers are currently engaged in system leadership, and how many are interested in a future system leadership role.

— A quantitative online survey with 405 headteachers who are currently undertaking a system leadership role or are interested in undertaking one to understand opinion of the skills required to be effective in system leadership roles and current possession of those skills, thus identifying if and where there are skills gaps. This stage also looked at preferred styles of learning.

Overleaf is a summary of some of the key findings of the research programme. This summary should be viewed alongside the conclusions and recommendations (section 11) at the end of this report.

System leadership as a concept

This research shows that there is currently no widely recognised definition or understanding of what system leadership is, it can mean very different things to different headteachers.

The roles that comprise what we understand as system leadership are more tangible and easier to comprehend than any overarching terminology, but even then awareness of the roles can be very mixed. Excluding those who have undertaken such a role, three-quarters of headteachers are 'very familiar' with the school improvement partner (SIP) role, but awareness level drops to less than a third with regard to other key system leadership roles including executive head, national leader of education (NLE), local leader of education (LLE) and professional partner.

Levels of system leader activity

Just under two-thirds of headteachers (63 per cent) are currently undertaking any type of system leadership role, with 58 per cent of headteachers currently undertaking one of the following roles (defined as a key system leadership role):

— headteacher mentor

— LLE

— NLE

— SIP

— executive head

— consultant head

— federation head or chair of a formal developmental group

— professional partner

A quarter of headteachers are currently carrying out two or more of these key system leadership roles.

The vast majority of those who are currently in a key system leadership role state that it is more likely than not that they will still be in their system leadership role in three years' time (90 per cent of LLEs, 88 per cent of SIPs, 85 per cent of NLEs and 83 per cent of headteacher mentors).

Benefits of system leadership

It is important that involvement in system leadership offers tangible benefits to headteachers considering a system leadership role. Benefits to pursuing a system leadership role include ambition to progress career, seeking new challenges, a natural passion for education, more time available, opportunity to secure additional funds for current school and ability to influence policy and have a public voice.

When asked to rank the most important drivers that would attract them to a system leadership role, potential system leaders identified these as being 'may improve my own school' and 'own personal development'. Current system leaders ranked 'a sense of responsibility to improve outcomes for children outside my own school' as well as 'may improve my own school' and 'own personal development' as their key drivers.

Positively, there is almost universal agreement (98 per cent) among current system leaders that they have found their system leadership role personally rewarding, and 88 per cent agree that their own school has improved as a result of their involvement. So the key incentives of what would attract them into a system leadership role are being realised.

Levels of interest in specific system leadership roles

Among potential system leaders, there is widespread interest in the professional partner role (in which experienced heads are trained by the National College to support newly appointed heads), with 92 per cent of those not currently undertaking a headteacher mentoring/professional partner role expressing some interest in this role. This role is seen by many as a natural first entry to system leadership that may trigger interest in other, more involved or complex roles at a future date. A significant proportion of those interested (45 per cent) express an interest in taking up the role within the next two years.

Interest in the other key system leadership roles from those currently not performing these specific roles is not as strong. Just under two-thirds (61 per cent) of headteachers expressed some interest in the LLE role and just over half (54 per cent) expressed some interest in the SIP role. The changes to the SIP role outlined in the previous government's white paper (HM Government, 2009)[1] does not seem to have significantly affected the level of interest in the role, with only 8 per cent of current and potential SIPs stating that the changes made the role less attractive.

Half of the potential system leaders interviewed would be interested in an executive headship in the future, and 44 per cent would be interested in an NLE role in the future. These figures reflect the perceived complexity of, and experience required for these roles and indicates a perception of a progressive pathway through system leadership, ie professional partner to LLE and SIP and finally to NLE.

There seems to be more likelihood of take-up of system leadership roles in the secondary sector where 77 per cent of secondary heads are currently performing a system leadership role compared with 56 per cent of primary heads.

The key reasons for headteachers not pursuing system leadership roles are a perceived lack of experience and concerns that it would detract from their role as a headteacher. There can, in some cases, also be concerns about how a system leadership role such as SIP can sit alongside traditional headship. It would be a challenge for some headteachers to adapt from being a peer to being an assessor.

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1   The research explored interest in the previous government's proposed model which involved enhanced SIP responsibilities around supporting the process of self-evaluation, using diagnostic skills to identify areas for improvement, and brokering appropriate support. SIPs would have signalled where a school does not have the capacity to improve and ensure underperformance was tackled swiftly. At the time of this report being finalised (July 2010) the new coalition government had not published its plans for the SIP role, or its equivalent, in the future.

System leadership skills

The skills required of system leaders are often seen to be a natural extension of those for headship and many of the skills identified as the most important for key system leadership roles tend to overlap ie similar skills are required for a professional partner as for LLE, NLE and executive head.

Current and potential system leaders feel that the main skills required of a system leader are 'experience of being a headteacher', communication skills, strategic thinking ability and the ability to identify and implement key priorities for school improvement (especially in the more involved system leadership roles such as NLE).

However, the levels of involvement, contexts and responsibilities within which the roles are fulfilled will often be very different and this means that the deployment and/or depth of the skill can be quite different across roles. Thus the skills required in the relatively accessible headteacher mentor role would not be as developed as those required by the more involved NLE role.

The SIP role, with its emphasis on data analysis skills, was the one role that was considered to require something fundamentally different in terms of skills from the other system leadership roles.

Although headteachers generally exhibit quite high levels of confidence in their core skills for system leadership roles, there is a significant gap between those who are currently in a system leadership role and largely confident about their capacity and those who are interested in a system leadership role but often lacking confidence and/or experience of a wide range of school contexts.

Training, learning and development

In terms of training, learning and development, there is scope to offer more support to current and potential system leaders. A third (34 per cent) of current system leaders agree that they would have benefitted from more support to help them be effective and over half (56 per cent) do not agree that they had received enough training and professional development to 'fulfil... role(s) effectively from the outset'.

In order to build confidence and skills, current system leaders stated that the following would be the most important aids: an experienced coach/mentor to offer support, support networks of others in a similar role and a formal induction to the role.

These findings are consistent with the work of Linda Bamford and Rosie Raffety conducted internally for the National College, highlighting the need for collaborative networking and, training and development that is tailored to system leader needs and roles ie formal induction and ongoing support for challenges encountered thereafter.

Although many of the skills required for system leadership roles may be consistent across roles, and are often a natural extension to headship, the opportunities for the National College are real and could include:

— providing a visible pathway into and through system leadership

— introducing and contextualising the role – what it is, what is required and expected, likely challenges and solutions, information and sources of assistance

— delivering and facilitating the support that enables challenges to be tackled as and when they arise, including developing collaborative partnerships and networking, mentoring and support

Research objectives

This survey was conducted to help the National College for School Leadership (National College) to develop its provision and support for system leaders, ie leaders who work beyond their own school to support other schools.

The main objectives of the survey were as follows.

1.   Explore awareness and understanding of system leadership

This included exploring what the term system leadership means to headteachers, and whether the National College's internal definition of system leadership resonates with them. This definition is:

> System leaders are leaders who work within and beyond their individual organisations; sharing and harnessing the best resources that the system can offer to bring about improvement in their own and other organisations; and influencing thinking, policy and practice so as to have a positive impact on the lives and life chances of all children and young people.

2.   Measure current system leadership activity and appeal of system leadership roles

Integral to this objective was a measure of;

awareness of specific system leadership roles among headteachers

the number of headteachers currently performing a system leadership role

level of interest in specific system leadership roles in the future (from those currently not undertaking these roles)

This would enable the National College to identify where there is lack of interest in specific roles which may lead to a gap in the number of those system leaders in the future.

3.   Understand the appeal and drivers of the system leadership role

From current system leaders, we sought their motivations, thoughts and concerns about performing their role(s). For potential system leaders, we explored the appeal of undertaking a system leadership role, the projected benefits and the barriers towards undertaking such roles. Also explored was whether the new responsibilities for the SIP role, as outlined in the previous government's white paper (HM Government, 2009), made the SIP role more or less appealing.

4.   Assess developmental needs

The survey assessed the key skills cited by both current and potential system leaders as important for performing a specific system leadership role and how confident they felt in their possession of those skills. This enabled us to see the skill set of school leaders and where skills gaps lie. The survey also assessed the training and development needs of current and potential system leaders.

Research design and methodology

A programme of qualitative and quantitative research was undertaken between December 2009 and April 2010. The research had three components:

— Twenty depth interviews among those currently performing or interested in a system leadership role. This phase was designed to explore attitudes, perceptions and behaviour among current and potential system leaders and provide a framework that informed the quantitative phases.

  · Interviews took place in December 2009 and January 2010.

  · An average interview lasted for 45 minutes, and interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone.

— Among a random sample of headteachers, 1,092 telephone interviews took place. Of this sample, 700 worked in primary schools, 290 in secondary and 102 in special schools. This phase was designed to quantify the number of headteachers undertaking a system leadership role, levels of awareness of key system leadership roles, levels of interest in pursuing different system leadership roles, and the reasons for any lack of interest. The importance of skills for school leaders of today and tomorrow and level of interest in National College leadership provision was also surveyed.

  · Interviews took place in March 2010.

  · An average interview lasted for 15 minutes.

— An online survey to be completed by those currently performing or interested in a system leadership role was sent out, and 405 responses were received. This phase was designed to explore skill sets and confidence levels among both current system leaders and those interested in a system leadership role. This research also looked at the benefits of undertaking a system leadership role and the training, development and support required to do so.

  · Interviews took place in March and April 2010.

  · An average survey was completed in 15 minutes.

Familiarity with system leadership

Almost all headteachers interviewed are aware of the National College (only 2 per cent of special school heads and 1 per cent of primary school heads were unaware) and, of those interviewed by telephone, 89 per cent of those from secondary schools, 82 per cent of those from primary schools and 73 per cent of those from special schools had previously attended a National College event.

The research showed that headteachers defined system leadership in many different ways, supporting previous National College research that there is no well-defined and agreed definition of system leadership. Taking just two examples of how system leadership could be defined, one head sees it as 'championing specialist schools', whilst another sees system leadership as the overarching term for 'school partnerships and community cohesion'.

The job role and experiences of headteachers inevitably influenced their level of awareness and understanding of system leadership. Those who are not undertaking a system leadership role (either a key role such as SIP or headteacher mentor, or a more informal role with some beyond-school component, such as leading collaborative partnerships) may have heard of the term system leadership, but would rarely define it consistently or with confidence. Even those in more formal system leadership roles did not always readily use the term system leadership, with their experiences often being defined by their specific role(s) rather than a wider definition.

However, the National College definition of system leadership did make sense to headteachers, and they understand and accept its benefits and value. It was more a case of the terminology not yet being established.

Experience of system leadership roles

There is a clear distinction among headteachers in the types of system leadership roles between those that are clearly defined, such as NLE, headteacher mentor and executive head, and those that are less clearly defined and are seen as more of an extension of the headteacher role. These latter, more informal roles included leading seminars and being a pupil support co-ordinator, for example. Such roles can take the headteacher outside his or her own school in a leadership capacity, but are seen as a fundamental part of headship rather than something that is a clearly defined, standalone role.

When asked, 60 per cent of headteachers said that they had undertaken a role where they had provided educational leadership and/or support to another school, group or individual. Headteachers were asked which roles they had undertaken and were also prompted with specific roles. Table 1 summarises the responses to these questions.

Table 1: System leadership roles undertaken

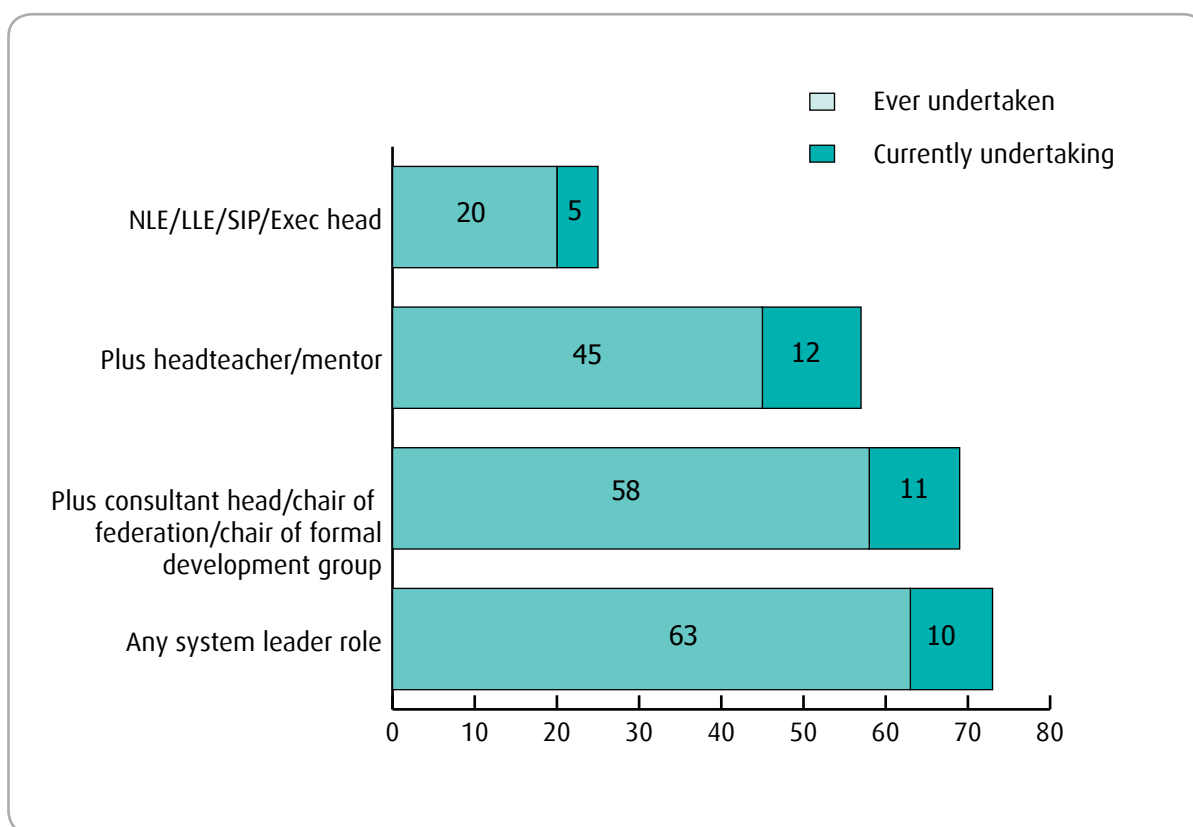|	Role currently undertaken (per cent)	Role previously undertaken (per cent)	Total (per cent)
Headteacher mentor	35	15	50
Consultant head	14	10	24
Chair / leader of a formal development group (eg, Building Schools for the Future)	14	4	18
Chair / leader of a collaboration or soft federation	11	5	16
School improvement partner (SIP)	9	2	11
Local leader of education (LLE)	7	3	10
National leader of education (NLE)	6	1	7
Executive headteacher / chief executive / leader of a hard federation	4	2	6

Base: all telephone respondents (1,092)

Source: Q2a, Q3ai, Q3aii – 'System leadership roles undertaken'

The results show that half of headteachers either currently are or have previously been a headteacher mentor and almost a quarter (24 per cent) have experience as a consultant head. There was less experience of leader of education roles, with 10 per cent currently or previously having been an LLE and even fewer having experience as an NLE.

When the types of system leadership role were grouped together (Figure 1), it shows that a quarter of headteachers are currently undertaking or have ever undertaken a role as an NLE, LLE, SIP or executive head (roles defined as key system leadership roles). When grouping together all the system leadership roles, it can be seen that nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of headteachers are currently undertaking or have ever undertaken any type of system leadership role.

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Figure 1: System leadership roles by type

Base: all telephone respondents (1092)

Source: Q2a, Q3ai, Q3aii –'system leadership roles undertaken'

The survey revealed that 40 per cent of headteachers are currently undertaking at least two system leadership roles and a quarter (25 per cent) are currently undertaking two or more key system leadership roles[2] simultaneously. Heads undertaking multiple system leadership roles will often have strong and established leadership cover and support within their schools: indeed, their absence enables professional development for others. There is some evidence from the depth interviews that those undertaking a system leadership role for the first time have concerns over the effects on the management of their school should they take on any more out-of-school responsibilities.

In terms of roles and responsibilities, there is a clear pathway regarding involvement levels. The headteacher mentor role is the role seen as the most accessible to heads wanting to start to pursue a system leadership role. It is often seen primarily as a listening and counselling service of reassurance, and a degree of experience and empathy are the only real prerequisites for performing the role effectively. It is seen as fairly self-contained with no real accountability to an external authority. At the other end of the spectrum, the NLE role is seen as being far more involved and consequential, requiring more experience and the ability to put that experience into practice in a meaningful way to improve performance and outcomes. Here, the relationship is less about the one to one with a fellow head and more about representing the interests of the authorities.

Awareness of system leadership roles

Headteachers were asked about their familiarity with a number of system leadership roles that they are currently not undertaking or have not undertaken in the past, for example the 90 per cent of headteachers who have not been an LLE were asked how familiar they were with the LLE role (Figure 2).

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2   Key roles are defined as NLE, LLE, SIP, headteacher mentor, executive head, consultant head, chair of federation and chair of formal development group.

Figure 2: Familiarity with system leadership roles
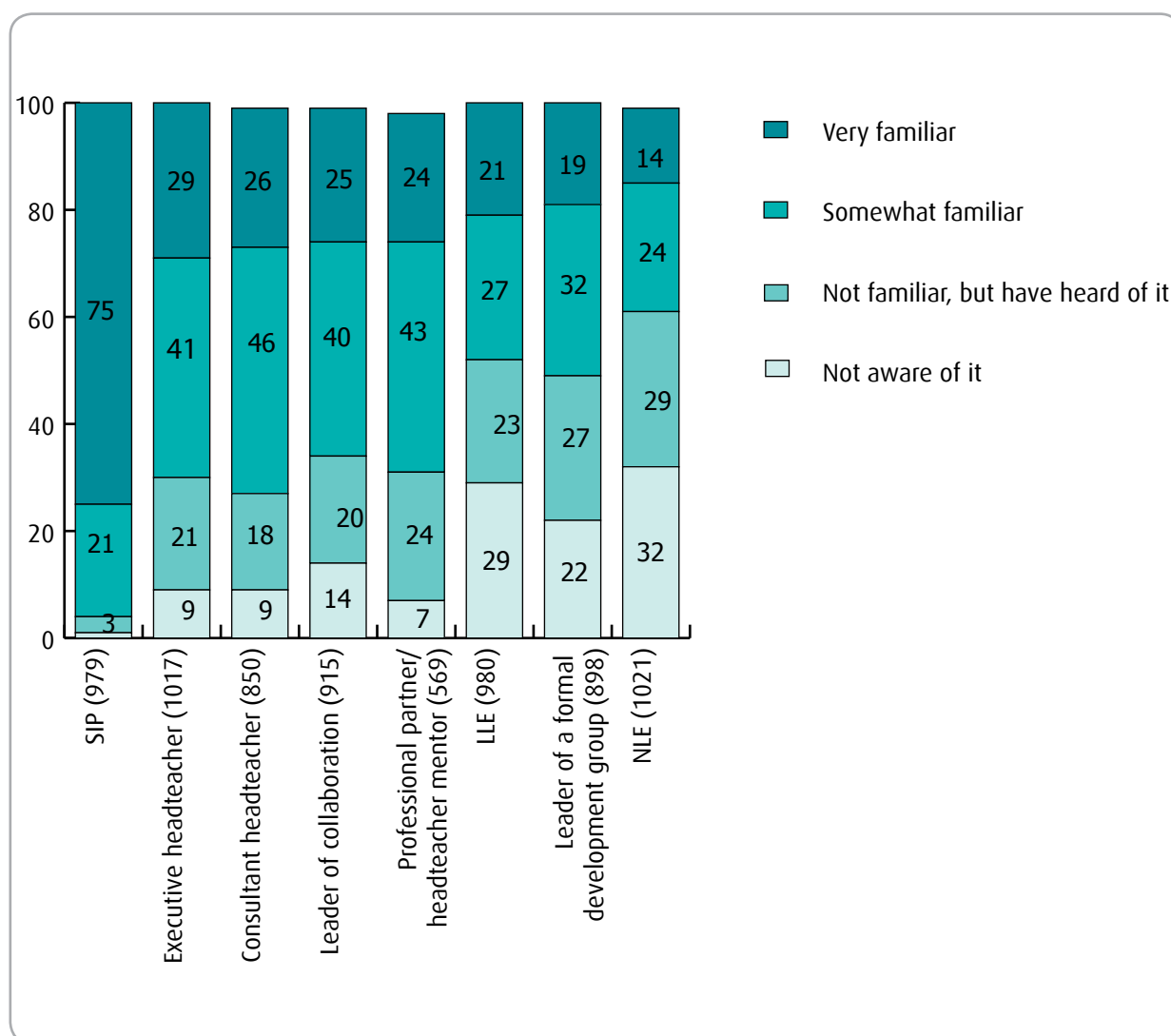
Base: headteachers who have not undertaken each role

Source: Q3b – 'To what extent are you familiar with the role and what it entails?'

Familiarity is highest with the SIP role, with 96 per cent of headteachers (excluding current SIPs) being very/somewhat familiar with this role. This high level of familiarity can be attributed to the direct contact headteachers maintain with SIPs. Headteachers are less familiar with the other roles, with 70 per cent being very/somewhat familiar with the executive headteacher role and 72 per cent being very/somewhat familiar with the consultant headteacher role. Familiarity with the LLE and NLE roles are lower with 48 per cent very/somewhat familiar with the LLE role and 38 per cent very/somewhat familiar with the NLE role.

Attitudes and motivations towards system leadership roles

The main reasons for headteacher interest in system leadership roles included personal ambition to progress and develop their career (including experiencing new challenges), with many seeing a movement into system leadership as a natural career progression once experience as a head has been gained. Other reasons for pursuing a system leadership role reflected a natural passion for education and the chance to have a public voice. Many system leaders had been approached by other people working in education, including the National College, to take on the role.

Headteachers were asked to rank their key motivations for becoming a system leader in order of priority. As shown in Table 2, they ranked improving the school, their own personal development and a sense of responsibility towards children outside their school as being their primary motivations. Financial benefits of the role to either themselves or their school are seen the least important factors. Positively, these drivers to involvement do seem to have been experienced by most system leaders in the course of their system leadership exposure. A high number (98 per cent) agreed they found the role personally rewarding, 88 per cent agreed that their school had improved as a result of their involvement in system leadership and 78 per cent agreed that they had had an impact on the outcomes for children at other schools.

Table 2 splits out current vs potential system leader responses to see where there were differences in opinion. It shows that current system leaders attach more importance to a sense of responsibility to improve the outcomes for children outside their own school; this supports the findings from the depth interviews that potential system leaders need to assess and consider the value of involvement to them and their school – is involvement truly worth it or not? – before pursuing a system leadership role.

Table 2: Ranking of key motivations (current and potential system leaders)

What motivates you to pursue a system leadership role? (1 = top priority, 9 = lowest priority)	Total mean ranking	Current system leaders	Potential system leaders
	(388)	(174)	(114)
May improve my own school	3.3	3.3	3.1
Own personal development	3.7	3.7	3.6
A sense of responsibility to improve outcomes for children outside my own school	3.7	3.4	4.5
Chance to bring learning back to the school	4.1	4.2	4.0
Opens up opportunities for colleagues at my own school	4.1	4.2	4.1
Giving something back	4.9	5.0	4.8
Financial benefits to school	6.6	6.6	6.7
Opportunity to continue with role beyond retirement	6.7	6.9	6.7
Financial benefit to self	7.7	7.7	7.5

Base: All online respondents (388)

Source: Q5a – 'Please rank the following in priority order from top to bottom to indicate what motivates you to pursue a system leadership role'

Potential barriers to adopting a system leadership role centred on the heads' self-defined lack of relevant experience and confidence, with a concern that it would detract their focus from their school; this seems a reasonable concern given that two-thirds of current system leaders agree/agree strongly that the time commitment has put pressure on their capacity to do other things. Some also felt the pay is too low for certain roles, and some were uncomfortable with roles, most obviously the SIP, that were too closely tied to the local authority.

School leader skills

All headteachers in the survey were asked about what they felt are the most important skills for school leaders. Table 3 summarises their answers, based on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 means 'not at all important' and 6 means 'very important'.

	Primary	Secondary	Special	Total
	(700)	(209)	(102)	(1092)
Developing a learning culture and organisation	5.8	5.9	5.8	5.8
Good interpersonal skills	5.7	5.7	5.8	5.7
Leading learning to raise attainment	5.7	5.8	5.7	5.7
Implementing change and improvement successfully	5.6	5.7	5.8	5.7
Leading change to raise attainment	5.6	5.7	5.6	5.6
Working with parents	5.6	5.4	5.7	5.6
Staffing issues/dealing with difficult staff	5.3	5.3	5.5	5.3
Developing future leaders	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.3
Working with governors to strategically develop the school	5.2	5.1	5.3	5.2
Developing future leaders/succession planning	5.1	5.3	5.2	5.2
Adapting your leadership style to the school's culture and needs	5.1	5.0	5.1	5.1
Forming collaborative partnerships with other schools and agencies to improve outcomes	4.9	4.8	5.1	4.9
Effective project management skills	4.8	4.6	5.1	4.8
Managing finances and premises	4.7	4.5	4.9	4.7

Table 3: Ranking of skills for school leaders

Base: All telephone respondents (1,092)

Source: Q6 – 'How important do you feel that the following skills are for the school leaders of today and tomorrow?'

Table 3 shows that traditional, learning-focused areas of headship remain most important, backed up by the interpersonal skills that are essential for effective leadership. Forming collaborative partnerships, project management skills and managing finances and premises were perceived as being slightly less important.

The 1,092 headteachers were asked to what extent they felt that they possessed the skills needed to fulfil their future leadership ambitions, on a scale where 1 means 'not confident that you possess the skills' and 6 means 'very confident'. They gave an average score of 4.9, thus displaying broad if not complete levels of confidence that they have the required skills to fulfil future leadership ambitions (although such ambitions are, of course, self-defined). For comparison, in 2009 the mean score attributed by heads was 4.7 but care needs taking in attributing significance to this because the 2009 survey of 624 heads included some online responses whereas this question in the 2010 survey was asked only over the telephone.

As shown in Figure 3, confidence was generally highest among secondary heads (28 per cent very confident compared to 20 per cent of primary school heads). There is also greater confidence exhibited by those interested in the NLE role (26 per cent); this would appear to reflect the greater exposure and experience required to consider this role.
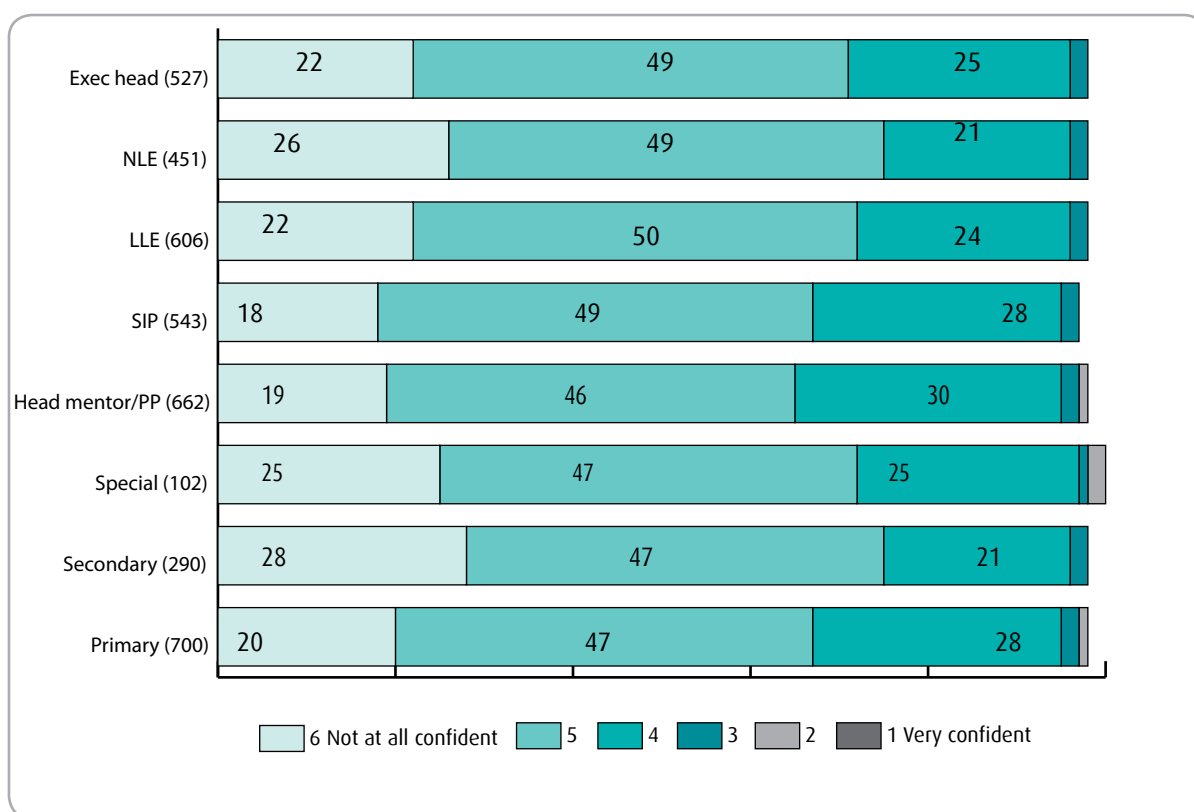

Figure 3: Confidence in the role

Base: All telephone respondents (1,092) Those who are interested in the specific roles in the future

Source: Q7 – 'To what extent do you feel that you possess the skills you need to fulfil your future leadership ambitions?'

Further insight into the needs and attitudes of headteachers comes from their responses to the value of other (potential) National College activities (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Value of potential National College activities
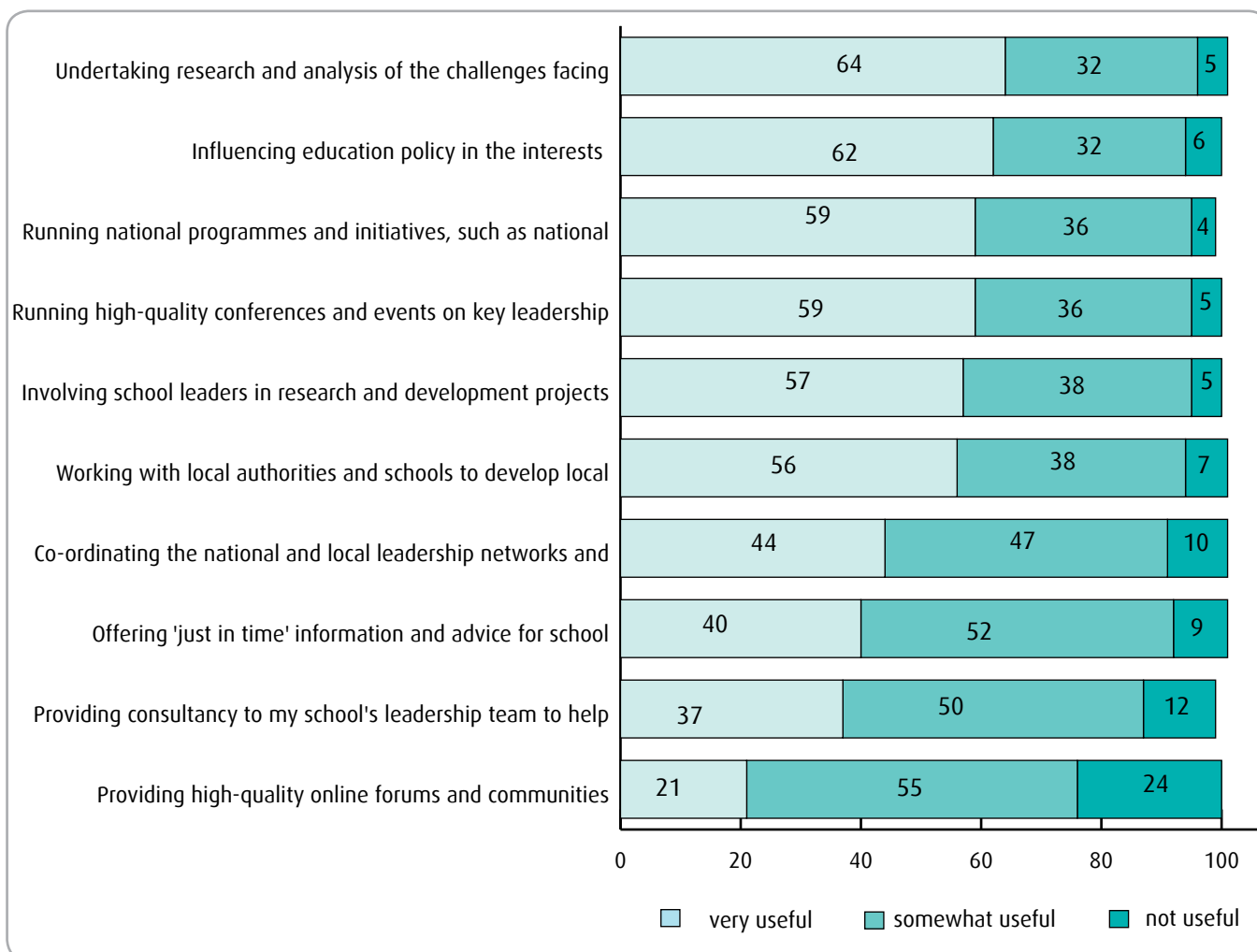
Base: Telephone – all respondents (1092)

Source: Q8 – 'Please indicate the extent to which you consider the following activities of the National College would be useful to you'

Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of the headteachers interviewed felt that undertaking research and analysis of the challenges facing school leaders and best practice in addressing these was very useful, with a third stating this would be somewhat useful. Of the more innovative or unusual activities, there is interest in, if not absolute endorsement of these activities: 92 per cent of heads could see some value in 'just in time' information and advice for schools (40 per cent considered this to be very useful) and 87 per cent saw some value in the provision of consultancy to their school's leadership team (37 per cent viewing this as very useful). There is less interest in the National College providing high-quality online forums and communities, with only 21 per cent of headteachers feeling that this would be a very useful activity for them, though the majority (55 per cent) can still see some use in such provision.

System leadership roles

Headteachers currently not undertaking a headteacher mentor/professional partner, SIP, LLE, NLE and executive head role were informed about each of these roles and asked about their level of interest in pursuing these roles in the future. Those not interested in these roles were asked why they are not interested, and those currently in role were asked about the likelihood of their still being in role in three years' time.

Professional partner/headteacher mentor

Of the 108 current headteacher mentors/professional partners who completed the online survey, 83 per cent said it is likely they would still be undertaking the role in three years' time. For those unlikely to continue with the role, the most common reasons cited are retirement, wishing to concentrate on other things and 'having enough' of the role (these were common reasons for all system leadership roles).

Overall there is widespread interest in the role of a Professional Partner among those who were not currently a headteacher mentor/professional partner, with 92 per cent very interested/interested or interested with reservations (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Interest in the role of headteacher mentor/professional partner
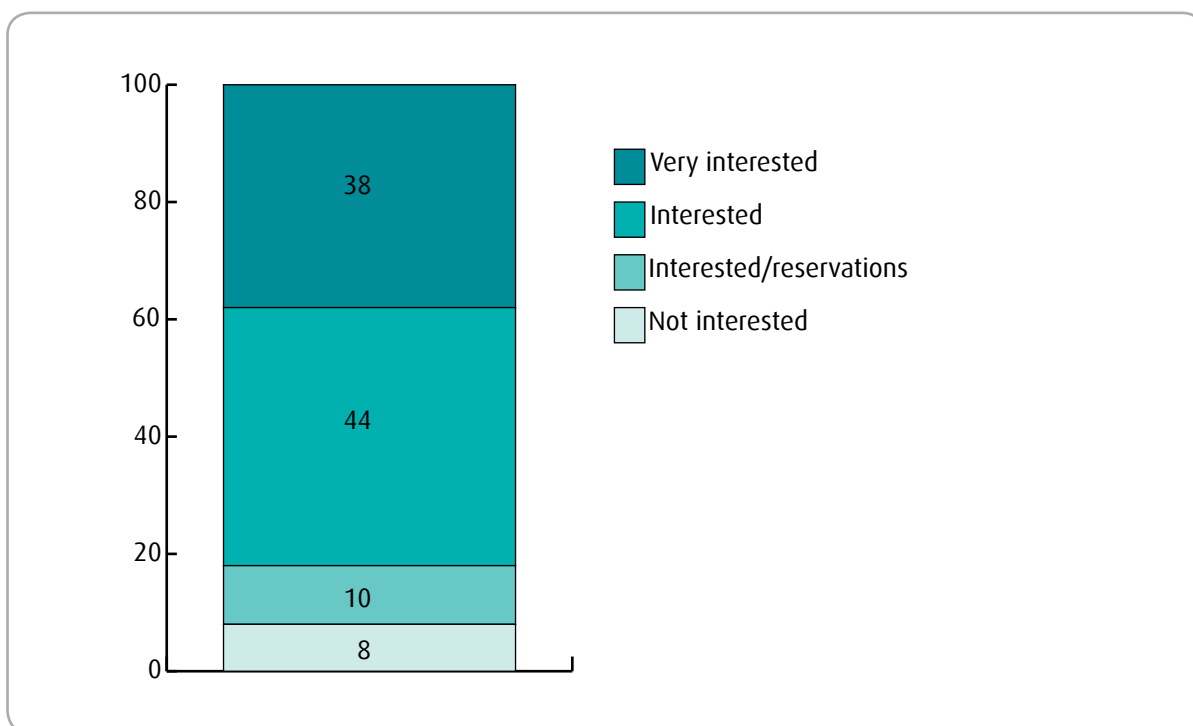
Base: Telephone - all who are not currently undertaking the role of headteacher mentor/professional partner (717)

Source: Q3c – 'I would like to know if you would be interested in such a role in the future'

Headteachers were keen to help colleagues on a one-to-one basis and contribute in a meaningful way. Taking on the role of a professional partner appears to them to be accessible, worthwhile and risk-free, and a natural extension to the role for current heads once they become established and comfortable in their headship.

Headteachers are interested in becoming a professional partner in the short to medium term, with 45 per cent open to starting this role within the next two years, and 41 per cent preferring to undertake the role within the next two to five years; the remaining 14 per cent were looking to start this role after 5 years.

The options listed in Figure 6 highlight concerns of pursuing the professional partner role and what is preventing those who are interested in the role from currently pursuing it.

Figure 6: Barriers to adopting a professional partner role
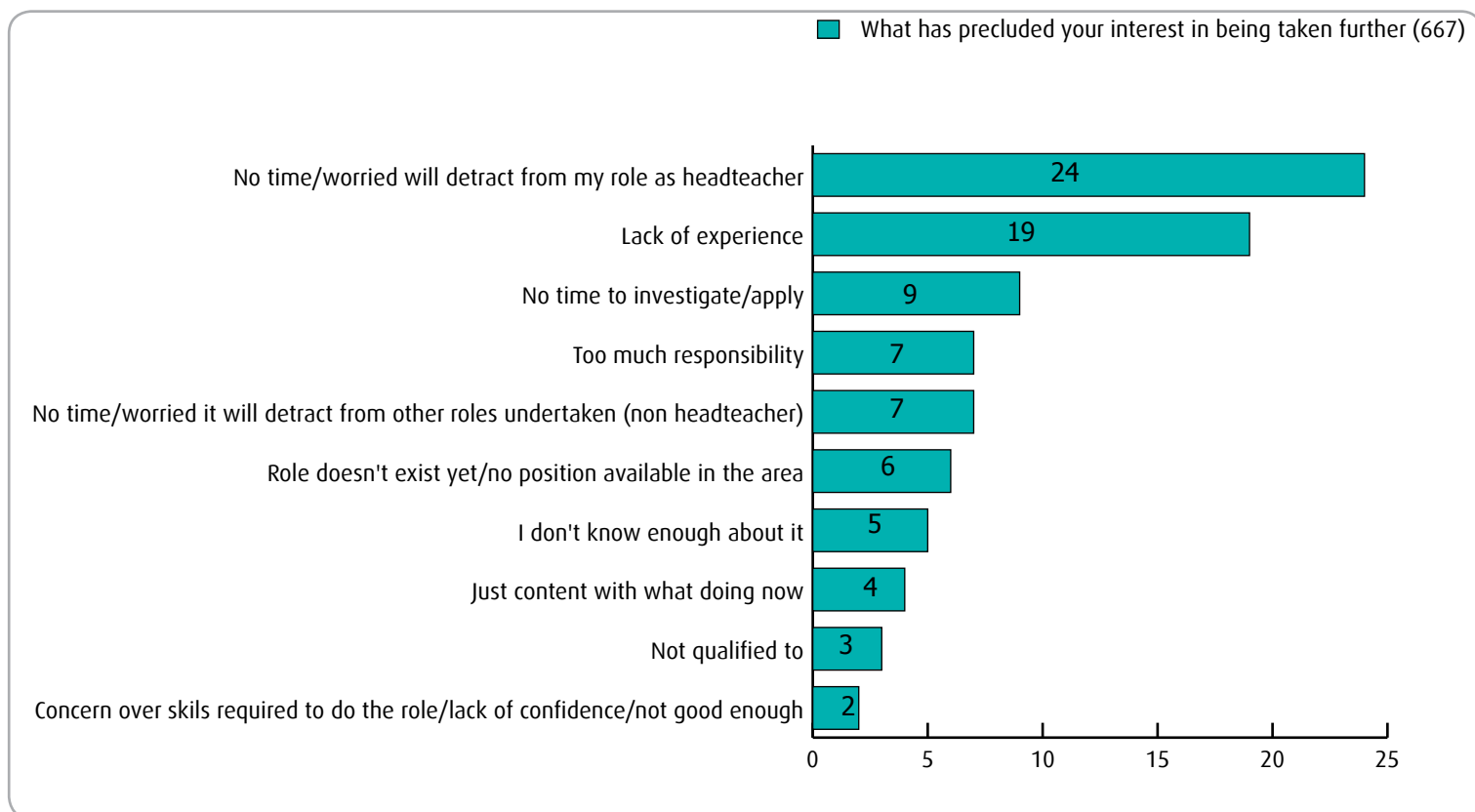
Base: Telephone - all interested in becoming professional partner, but not currently in role (667)

Source: Q5 – 'What has precluded your interest in taking that further so far?'

Almost a quarter (24 per cent) of those with an interest in becoming a professional partner have not undertaken this role yet because they worried that it would detract from their role as head. 19 per cent cited a lack of experience, whilst 9 per cent felt that they had insufficient time to investigate and apply for the role. These responses reflected also what came out of the depth interviews, ie a lack of confidence, a lack of experience and, often related to that, concern about the impact of involvement on time and their performance in the main headteacher role.

Local leader of education

Of the 48 current LLEs who completed the online survey, 90 per cent said that it is likely that they would still be undertaking this role in three years' time.

As shown in Figure 7, just under two-thirds (61 per cent) of those who were not currently an LLE were interested in taking on this role in the future.

Figure 7: Interest in adopting an LLE role

21

28

12

40

◼ Very interested   ◼ Interested   ◼ Interested/reservations   ☐ Not interested
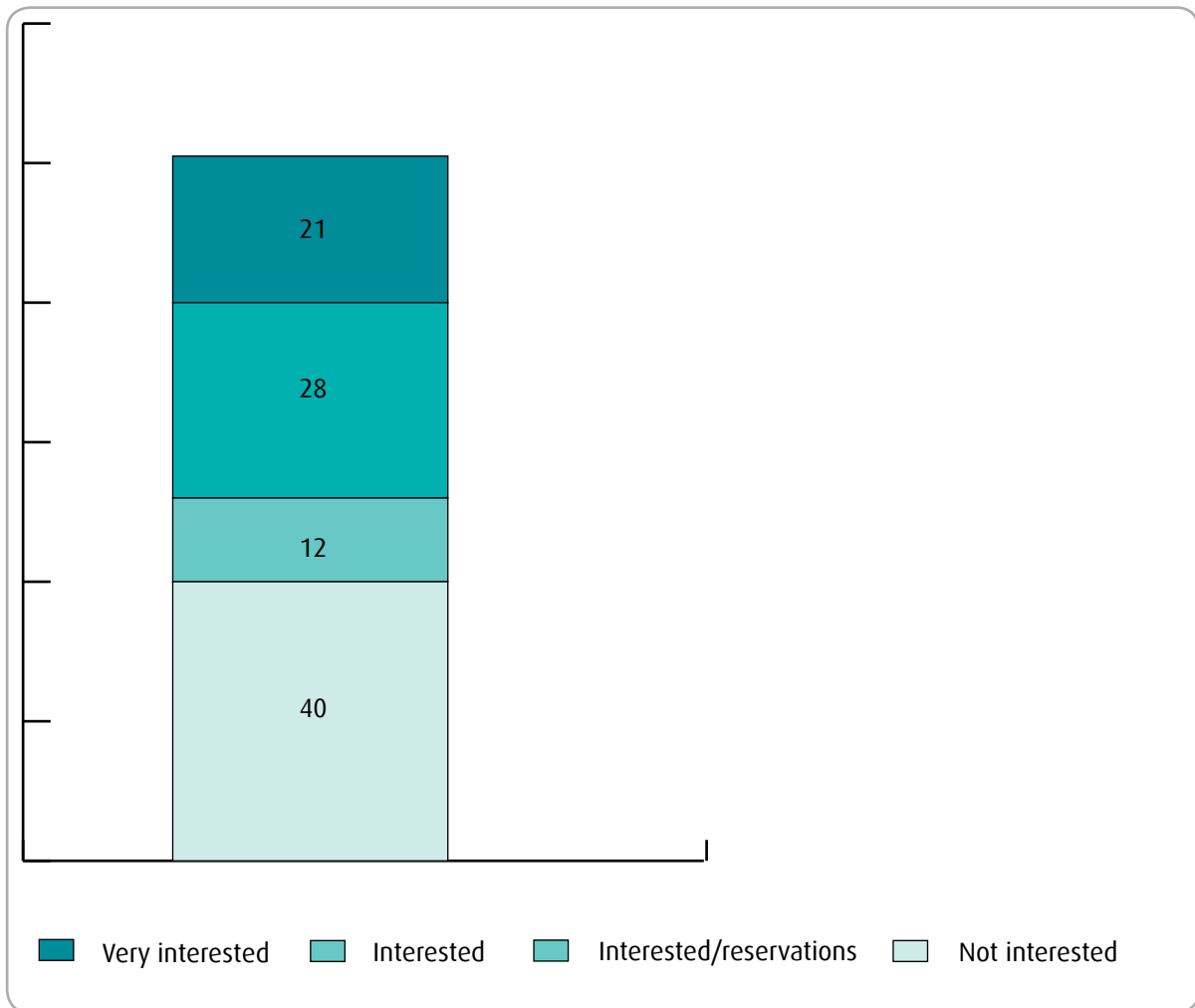
Base: Telephone - all who are not currently undertaking the role of LLE (980)

Source: Q3c – 'I would like to know if you would be interested in such a role in the future'

The research indicated that there is a greater perceived time commitment for the LLE role than the professional partner role, and that the LLE role required greater skills and experience, which could put some heads off. Equally, however, the LLE role is often seen as a natural extension from one-to-one mentoring for more motivated and experienced heads.

As with the professional partner role, headteachers are more interested in becoming an LLE in the short- to medium term rather than the long term: 89 per cent preferred to take on the role within the next five years.

Figure 8 shows why certain people are not interested in the LLE role, and also what has precluded those who are interested in it from taking on the role to date.

Figure 8: Barriers to adopting the LLE role
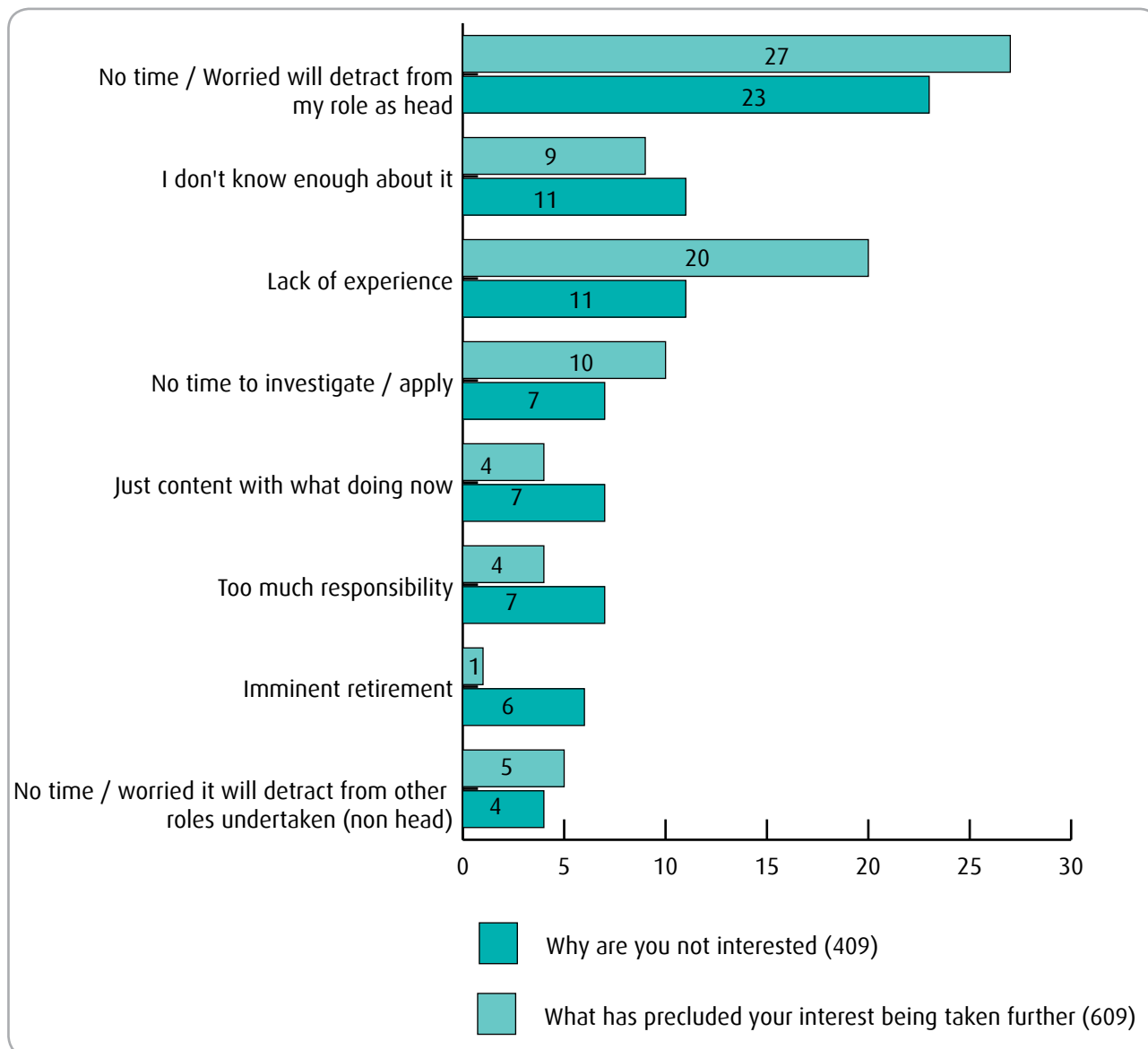
Base: Telephone – all not interested in the role (409) / all interested in becoming an LLE, but not currently in the role (609)

Source: Q4a – 'Why are you not interested in the role?' / Q5 – 'What has precluded your interest in taking that further so far?'

Those who are not interested in becoming an LLE are worried that it would detract from their current role as a head (23 per cent), they did not know enough about it (11 per cent) and they felt that they lacked experience (11 per cent). Those who are interested in the role are also worried that it would detract from their current role (27 per cent), cited their lack of experience (20 per cent), lacked the time to apply for it (10 per cent) and did not know enough about the LLE role (9 per cent) as the reasons for not having pursued their interest further.

School improvement partner[3]

Of the current SIPs who completed the online survey (a small base of 33), 88 per cent said that it was likely that they would still be undertaking this role in three years' time. For the 12 per cent who are unlikely to continue with the role, this was mainly because they wished to concentrate on other things in the future.

As shown in Figure 9, of those who are not currently a SIP, just over half (54 per cent) are interested in taking on this role in the future (13 per cent with reservations). Secondary school headteachers show greater interest in becoming a SIP, with 70 per cent citing an interest (14 per cent with reservations).

Figure 9: Interest in adopting a SIP role
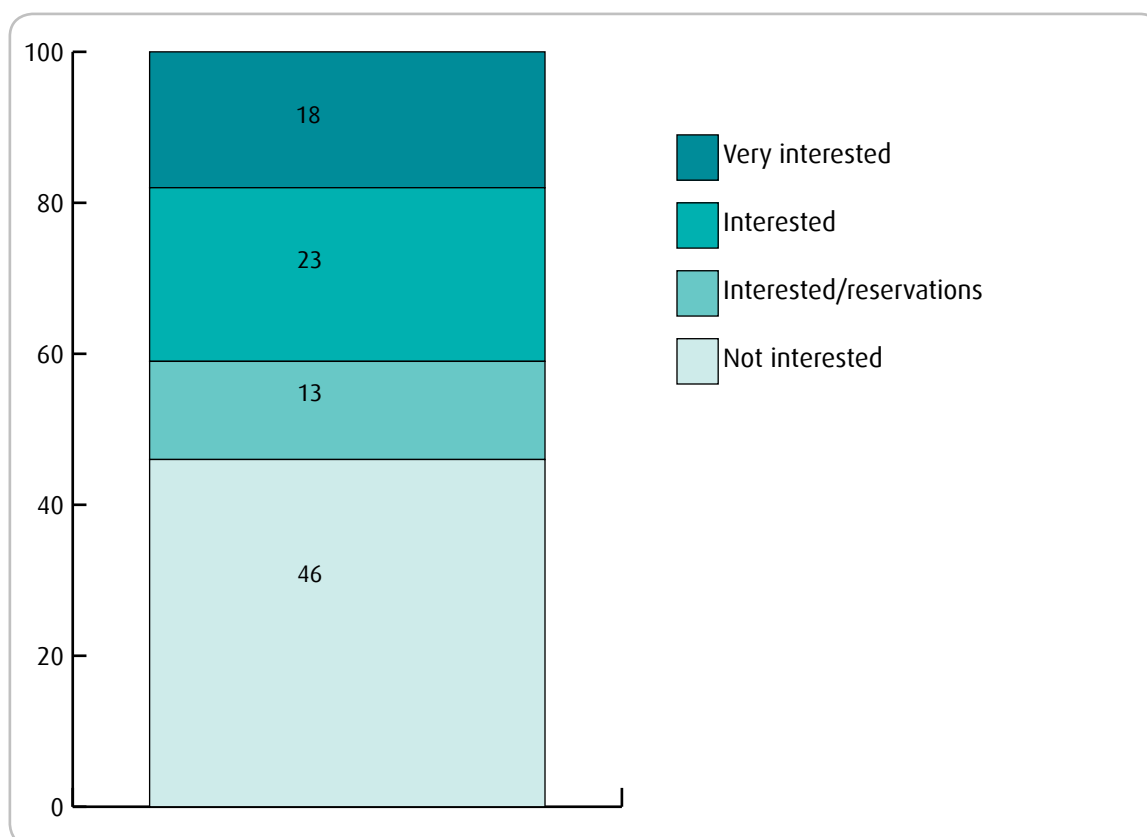
Base: Telephone - all who are not currently undertaking the role of SIP (978)

Source: Q3c – 'I would like to know if you would be interested in such a role in the future'

The interest in the SIP role is more longer term than was the case for the professional partner and LLE roles. Of those interested in becoming a SIP, 31 per cent wanted to take on the role within the next two years, 40 per cent in two to five years, and 28 per cent in more than five years' time. Evidence suggests that this reflects the need for a more specific skills base and a greater commitment – time and personal – to the role.

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3   If the coalition government changes the nature of the SIP role, these findings will need to be interpreted in the light of those changes.

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Figure 10 shows why headteachers are not interested in the SIP role, and also what has precluded those who are interested in it from taking on the role so far.

Figure 10: Barriers to adopting a SIP role
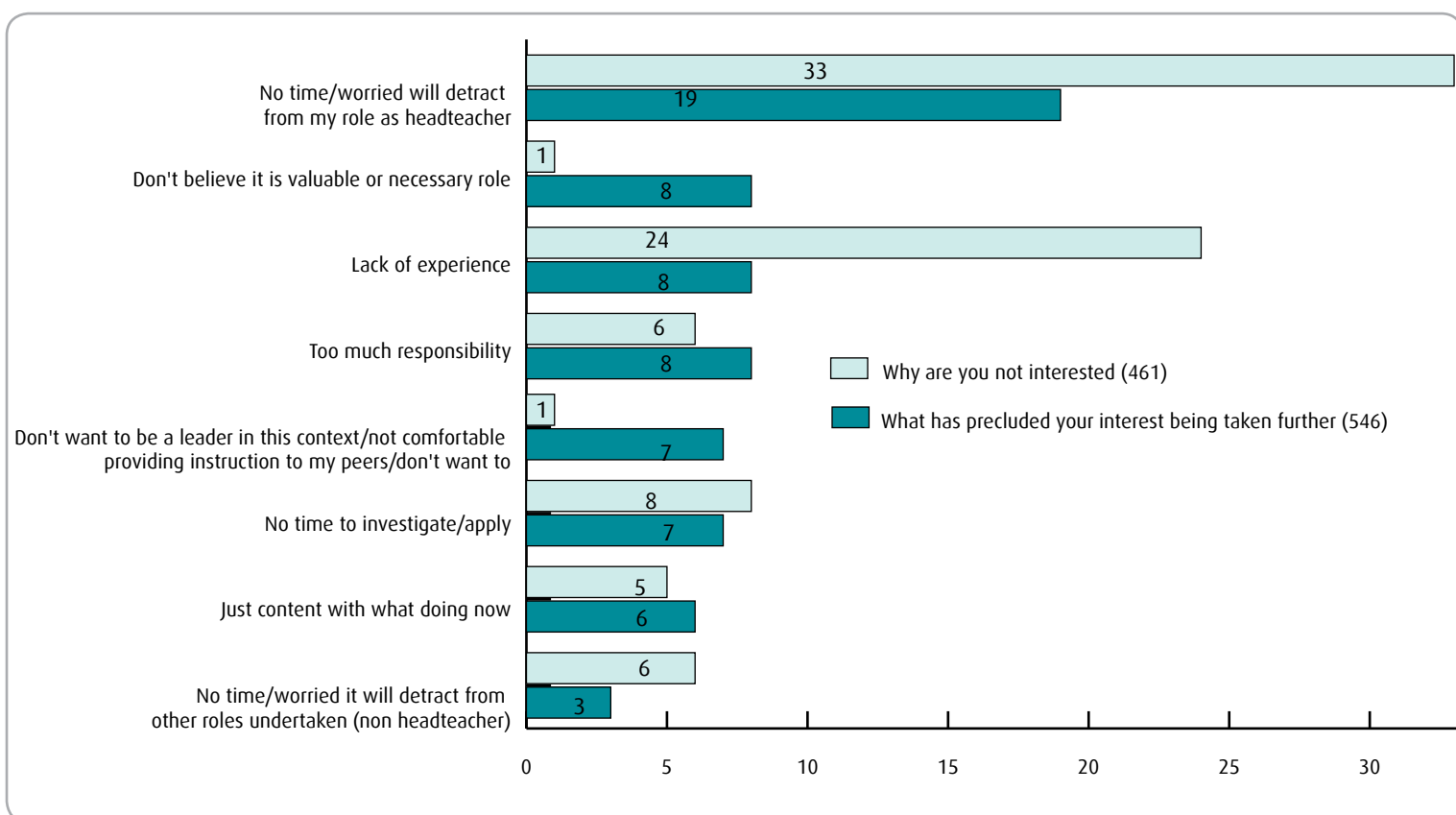
Base: Telephone – all not interested in the role (461) / all interested in becoming an SIP, but not currently in the role (546)

Source: Q4a – 'Why are you not interested in the role?' / Q5 – 'What has precluded your interest in taking that further so far?'

Those who are not interested in becoming a SIP said this was mainly because they saw that this role would detract from their current role as a head (19 per cent). Some also felt that the role was not necessary/ valuable, that they lacked experience or that being a SIP was too great a responsibility (all 8 per cent).

For those interested in becoming a SIP, the main reasons for not yet having undertaken the role is a concern that it would detract from their current role as head (33 per cent) and a perceived lack of experience (24 per cent).

Of those who are current SIPs, previous SIPs or are interested in taking on the role in the future, 40 per cent were very aware of the changes to the SIP role proposed in the white paper (HM Government, 2009)[4], a further 38 per cent were aware that there were changes but did not know the details of those changes, and 22 per cent were unaware of the proposed changes. Once the changes had been described, 45 per cent of current, past or interested SIPs said that the changes did not affect their willingness to consider a SIP role in future, 39 per cent said that these changes made the role a more attractive prospect and a relatively low 8 per cent felt that the SIP role was now a less attractive prospect.

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4   The white paper lists enhanced SIP responsibilities including supporting the process of self-evaluation, using diagnostic skills to identify areas for improve-ment, and brokering appropriate support. SIPs would signal where a school does not have the capacity to improve and ensure underperformance is tackled swiftly. However, this white paper was archived by the government that took office in May 2010, so it is unclear whether these reforms will go ahead.

In terms of their ability to fulfil the role, a minority of current, past or interested SIPs (15 per cent) said that these changes created more concerns about their ability to fulfil the role effectively, although a greater number (22 per cent) actually said that the changes left them feeling more confident about the role. Most (63 per cent) said that the changes to the SIP role description would have no impact on their ability to fulfil the role effectively.

It is, however, worth noting from the depth interviews there were concerns about the revisions to the SIP role, and these can be very deeply held and felt. In particular, the role is seen as moving away from that of critical friend to something less approachable and supportive:

> I need to look at things in a bit more detail but... the appeal of the role to me has been in building strong individual relationships.

> I feel the balance of power if you like may have tilted too far away from the individual towards the local authority. That wouldn't be what I would want to sign up to.

National leader of education

Of the current NLEs completing the online survey (a small base of 39), 85 per cent said that it is likely that they would still be undertaking this role in three years' time. For the 15 per cent who are unlikely to continue with the role, this was mainly because they intended to retire or that they wished to concentrate on other things in the future.

Of those who are not currently an NLE, 44 per cent of them were interested in taking on this role in the future (11 per cent with reservations) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Interest in adopting an NLE role
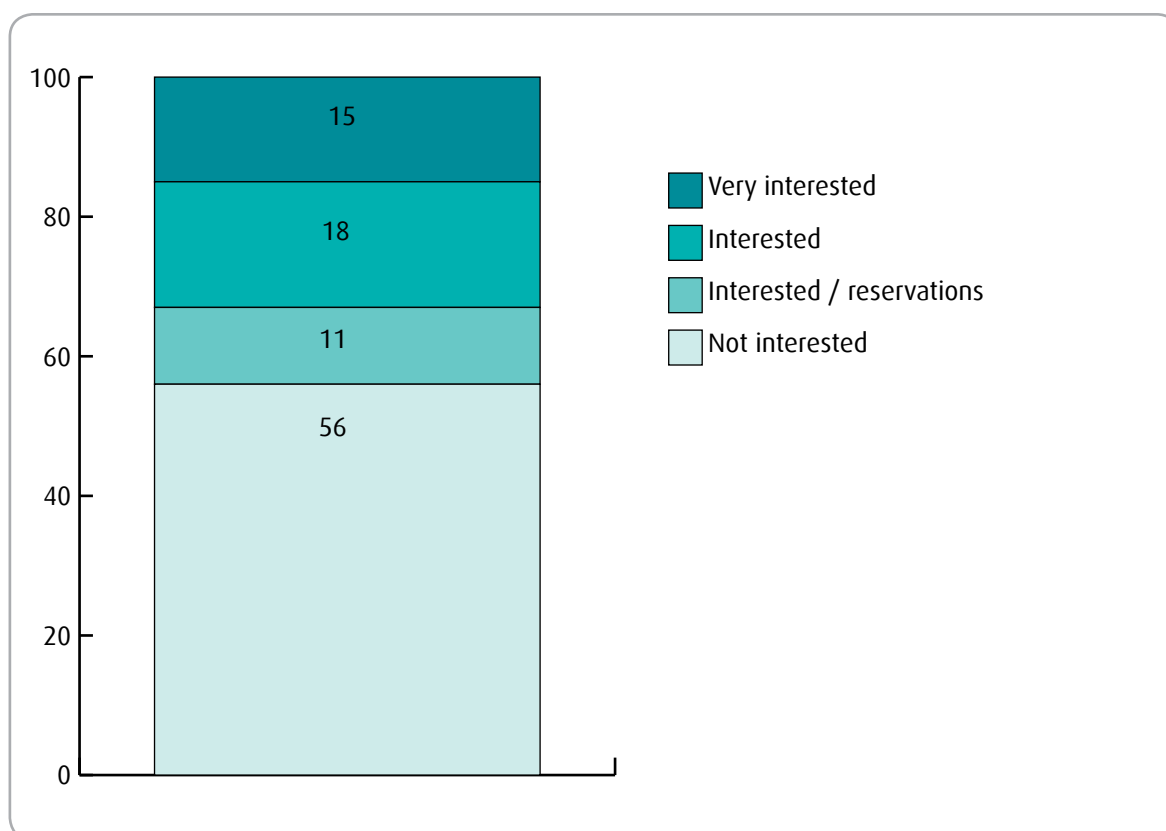
Base: Telephone - all who are not currently undertaking the role of NLE (1021)

Source: Q3c – 'I would like to know if you would be interested in such a role in the future'

Secondary school headteachers showed more interest in this role than their primary counterparts (63 per cent compared to 37 per cent very interested/interested/interested with reservations). Of all those interested in becoming an NLE, 29 per cent wanted to take on the role within the next two years, 39 per cent in two to five years, and 31 per cent in more than five years' time.

Figure 12 shows why some people are not interested in the NLE role, and also what has precluded those who are interested in it from taking on the role so far.

Figure 12: Barriers to adopting an NLE role
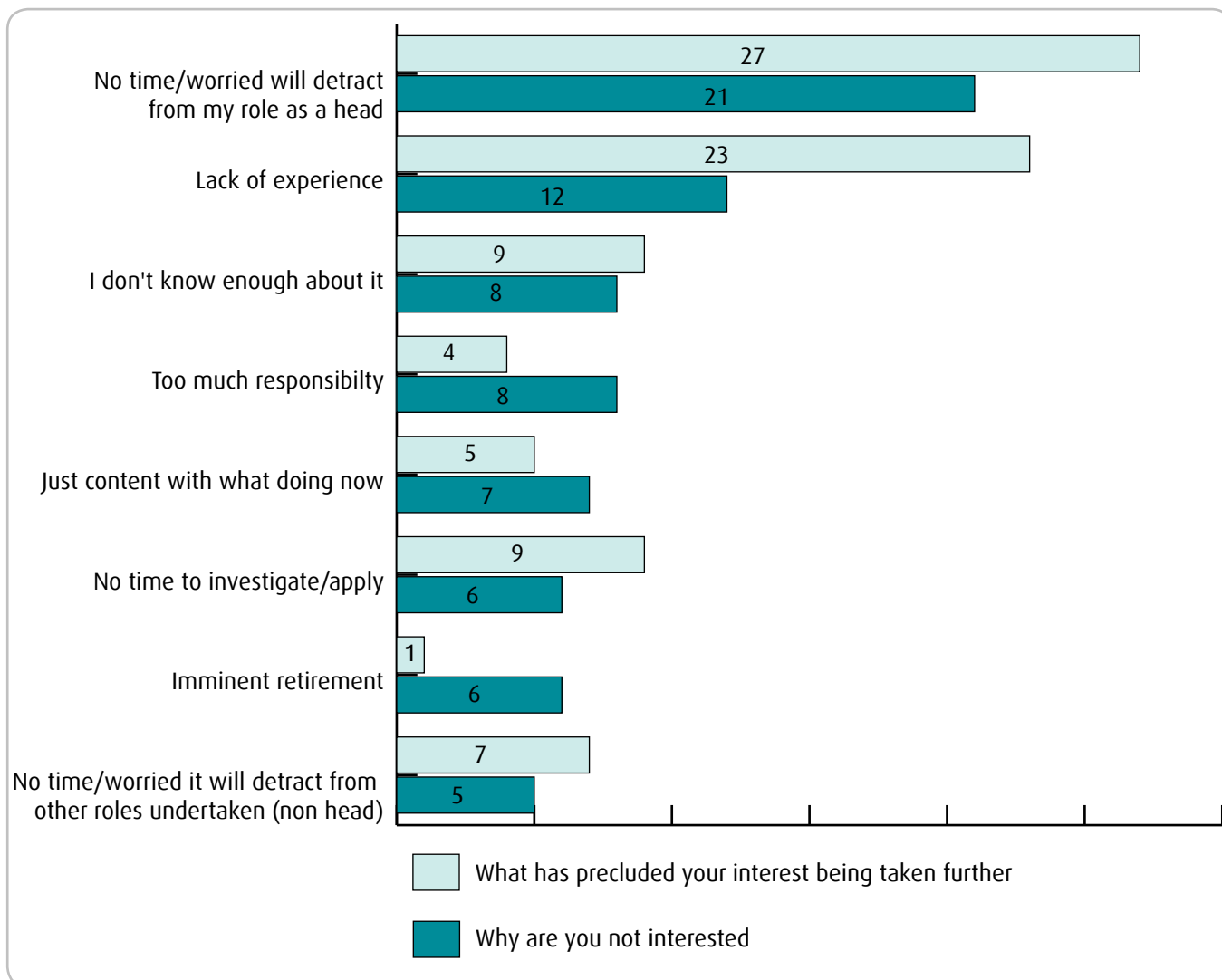
Base: Telephone – all not interested in the role (452) / all interested in becoming an NLE, but not currently in the role (589)

Source: Q4a – 'Why are you not interested in the role?' / Q5 'What has precluded your interest in taking that further so far?'

As with the other system leadership roles, the biggest factors affecting interest is a fear that it would detract from their role as head and a lack of experience. Lack of experience is more of an issue for those who are interested in the role but had currently not taken the role further (23 per cent) than for those who are not interested in the role at all (12 per cent).

Executive head

The survey showed that 70 per cent of headteachers are familiar with the role and know what it entails, and half of headteachers currently not pursuing this role are interested in taking on this role in the future (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Interest in adopting the role of executive head**
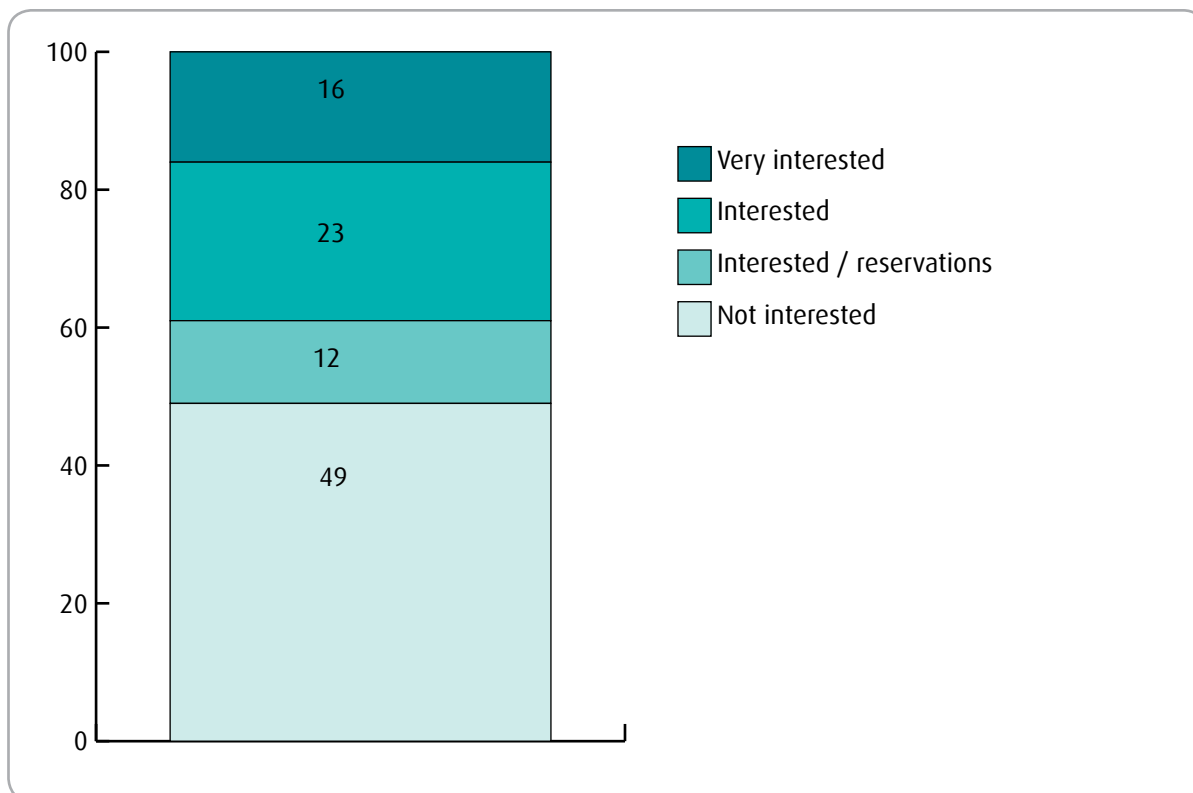
Base: Telephone - all who are not currently undertaking the role of executive head (1017)

Source: Q3c – 'I would like to know if you would be interested in such a role in the future'

Interest is highest in pursuing this role among those already in a federation structure, especially within secondary schools. Of those interested in becoming an executive head, 29 per cent wanted to take on the role within the next two years, 41 per cent in two to five years, and 29 per cent in more than five years' time.

Figure 14 shows why some people are not interested in the executive head role, and also what has precluded those who are interested in it from taking on the role so far.

Figure 14: Barriers to adopting an executive head role

Barrier	What has precluded your interest being taken further (530)	Why are you not interested (518)
The governors would not allow me to do it		20
Just content with what doing now	4	11
Too much responsibility	4	9
Lack of experience	19	8
No time to investigate/apply	7	8
I don't know enough about it	3	7
No time / worried will detract from my role as head	18	7
Imminent retirement	1	5
Role doesn't exist yet/no position available in the area	17	

☐ What has precluded your interest being taken further (530)
■ Why are you not interested (518)

Base: Telephone – all not interested in the role (518) / all interested in becoming an executive head, but not currently in the role (530)

Source: Q4a – 'Why are you not interested in the role?' / Q5 'What has precluded your interest in taking that further so far?'

Those who are not interested in the role cited their main reasons as the governors not allowing them to take on the executive head role (20 per cent) and that they are content with their current situation (11 per cent). Those who are interested but had not taken it any further so far stated what had precluded their interest is lack of experience (19 per cent), concern that it would detract from their role as a head (18 per cent) and the fact that the position was not available in their area (17 per cent).

System leadership skills

Those who are currently performing a specific system leadership role or are interested in pursuing that role in the future rated the importance of certain skills required to perform the role. Table 4 summarises the mean score out of 10 for the importance of system leadership roles, where 1 means 'not at all important' and 10 means 'very important'.

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Table 4: Ranking importance of system leadership role

Mean score out of 10 Base: all those currently doing each role	PP (232)	SIP (127)	LLE (117)	NLE (84)	Exec Hd (79)
Experience of being a headteacher	9.34	9.38	9.57	9.54	9.68
Direct experience of different types of schools	7.90	8.35	8.24	8.23	8.72
Knowledge/experience of policy and educational structures, including Ofsted and local authorities	8.46	9.07	8.34	8.39	8.71
Influencing and negotiation skills	8.52	8.62	9.03	9.35	9.30
A bank of case studies/best practice to call upon	7.34	8.00	7.88	7.75	7.80
Communication / presentation / interpersonal skills	9.22	9.16	9.35	9.48	9.56
Team-building skills	8.46	7.29	8.74	9.00	9.41
Ability to plan, setting goals and objectives	8.79	8.93	9.14	9.33	9.41
Coaching/mentoring skills	8.83	8.60	8.97	8.94	8.85
Data analysis skills	8.11	9.19	8.50	8.70	9.00
Strategic thinking ability (vision, big picture etc)	9.21	9.11	9.37	9.62	9.59
Access to further help and support structures including specific school intervention strategies such as the National Strategies Improving Schools Programme	7.88	8.30	8.12	8.19	8.20
Leading learning in other schools to raise attainment	8.00	8.22	8.86	8.92	8.95
Leading and manage change within other schools	8.07	8.17	8.84	9.15	9.29
Be able to rapidly identify and implement key priorities for school improvement	8.84	9.24	9.15	9.51	9.52
Developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools	8.68	8.57	9.00	9.35	9.37
Working effectively with pupils and parents from diverse backgrounds	7.74	6.80	7.88	8.10	8.84
Motivating and developing staff	8.98	7.86	8.89	9.17	9.38
Establishing effective behaviour management approaches in different school contexts	8.14	6.74	8.06	8.25	8.72

Base: Online – those currently doing or interested in each system leadership role

Source: Q1a – 'In relation to the (INSERT ROLE), can you rate each of the following from 1 to 10 to reflect what you perceive to be their relative importance in fulfilling this role effectively?'

As shown in Table 4, 'experience of being a headteacher, communication/presentation/interpersonal skills and strategic thinking ability are consistently seen as important skills to fulfil system leadership

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responsibilities. A wider range of important skills is required for what are seen as the more involved system leadership roles (eg NLE) and for the unique and far-reaching challenges presented by executive headship.

Figure 15 provides correspondence analysis[5] for the importance of skills according to each role. The skills nearest to the roles are those most important to the role.

Figure 15: Correspondence analysis of skills required for each role

Figure 15 shows that current and potential headteacher mentors/professional partners, NLEs, LLEs and executive heads have a similar profile in terms of the skills that they found important to their role. SIPs are different in that they placed more importance on data analysis skills, a bank of case studies and access to further help and support structures than the other four main system leadership roles.

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5   Correspondence analysis enables the capture of all the dimensions (skills) on a two-dimensional bi-plot chart that focuses on correlations. The dimensions are arranged in a way which accounts for the most amount of variance across all the scores and are plotted accordingly. The axes and figures are for structure and guidance only.

Training, learning and development

Current system leaders were asked to rank the importance of a number of methods to build the confidence and skills of an effective system leader using a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means 'not at all important' and 10 means 'completely important', 'training tailored to address the needs of the schools requiring support' received the highest average score of 8.1 (Table 5).

**Table 5: Ranking of importance of methods to build confidence and skills**

Importance of the following in helping to build confidence and skilss to be an effective system leader (1 = not at all, 10 = completely)	Mean
Training tailored to address the needs of the schools requiring support	8.1
Support networks of others in a similar role	7.9
Annual development days to top up initial training	7.7
An experienced coach/mentor to offer support	7.7
A formal induction to the role	7.6
Periodic conferences to share trends and best practice (eg twice a year)	7.4
A formal development programme to equip me for the role	7.4
Access to electronic library of best practice and case studies	6.3
Access to electronic portal and /or forum in which queries can be raised and answered	6.1

Base: Online - all current system leaders (174)

Source: Q6a – 'Thinking now about the provision of training, learning and development opportunities, please tell me how important you consider the following in terms of helping you have the confidence and skills to be an effective system leader'

However, and more pertinently, these system leaders were then asked to select from this list the three most important methods to help build their confidence and skills to be an effective system leader. As shown in Figure 16, 56 per cent of them cited the influence of mentor support, 48 per cent mentioned a support network of their peers and 47 per cent felt that a formal induction to the role were the most important methods.

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Figure 16: Ranking of three most important methods to build confidence and skills
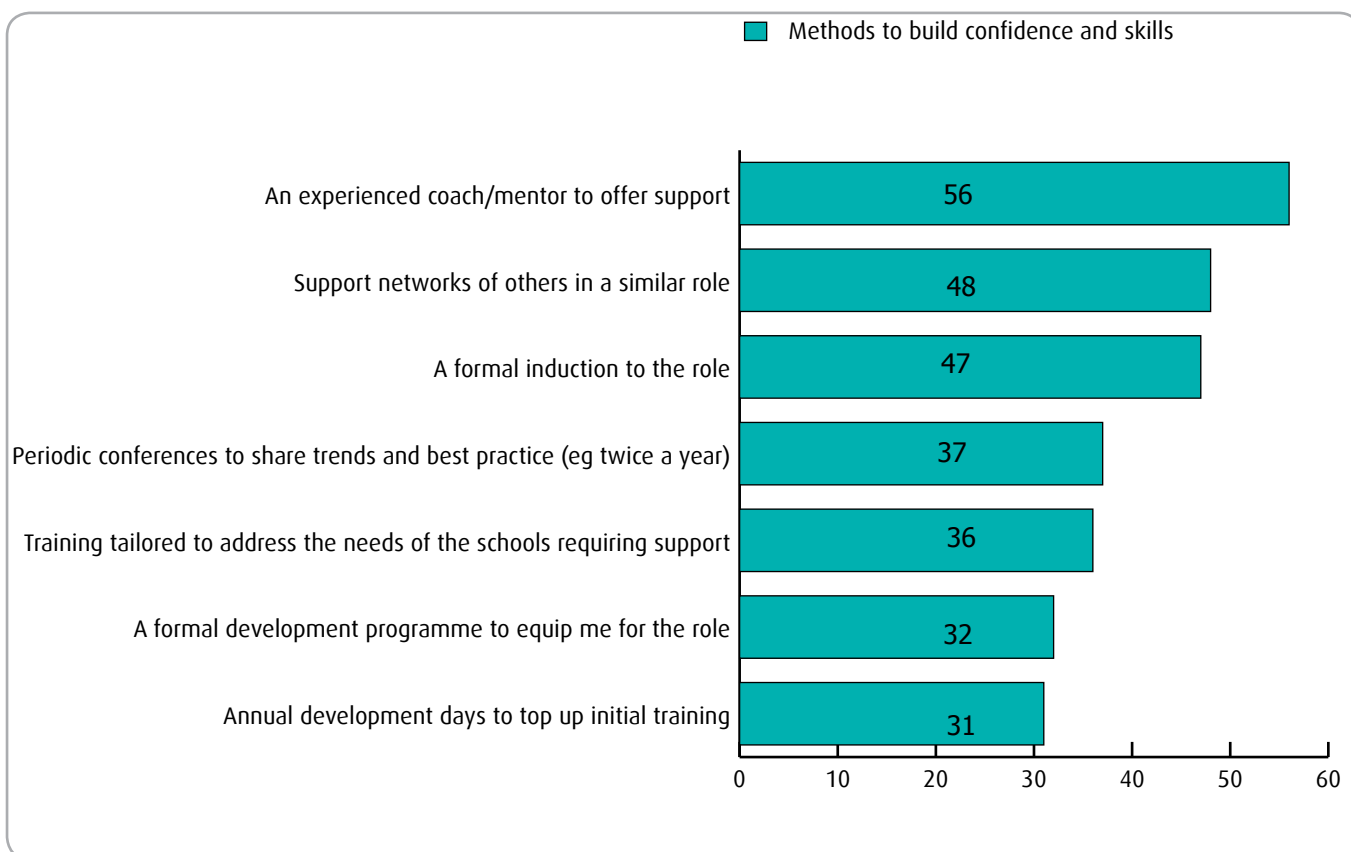
Base: Online – all current system leaders (174)

Source: Q6b – 'Please select the three most important'

Headteachers were also asked how strongly they agreed/disagreed with a number of statements regarding the skills, training and development of system leaders. The results show that a third would have benefited from more training and development in the role and over half (56 per cent) do not agree that they have had enough training and development to fulfil their system leadership role effectively from the outset (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Views on sufficiency of training and development
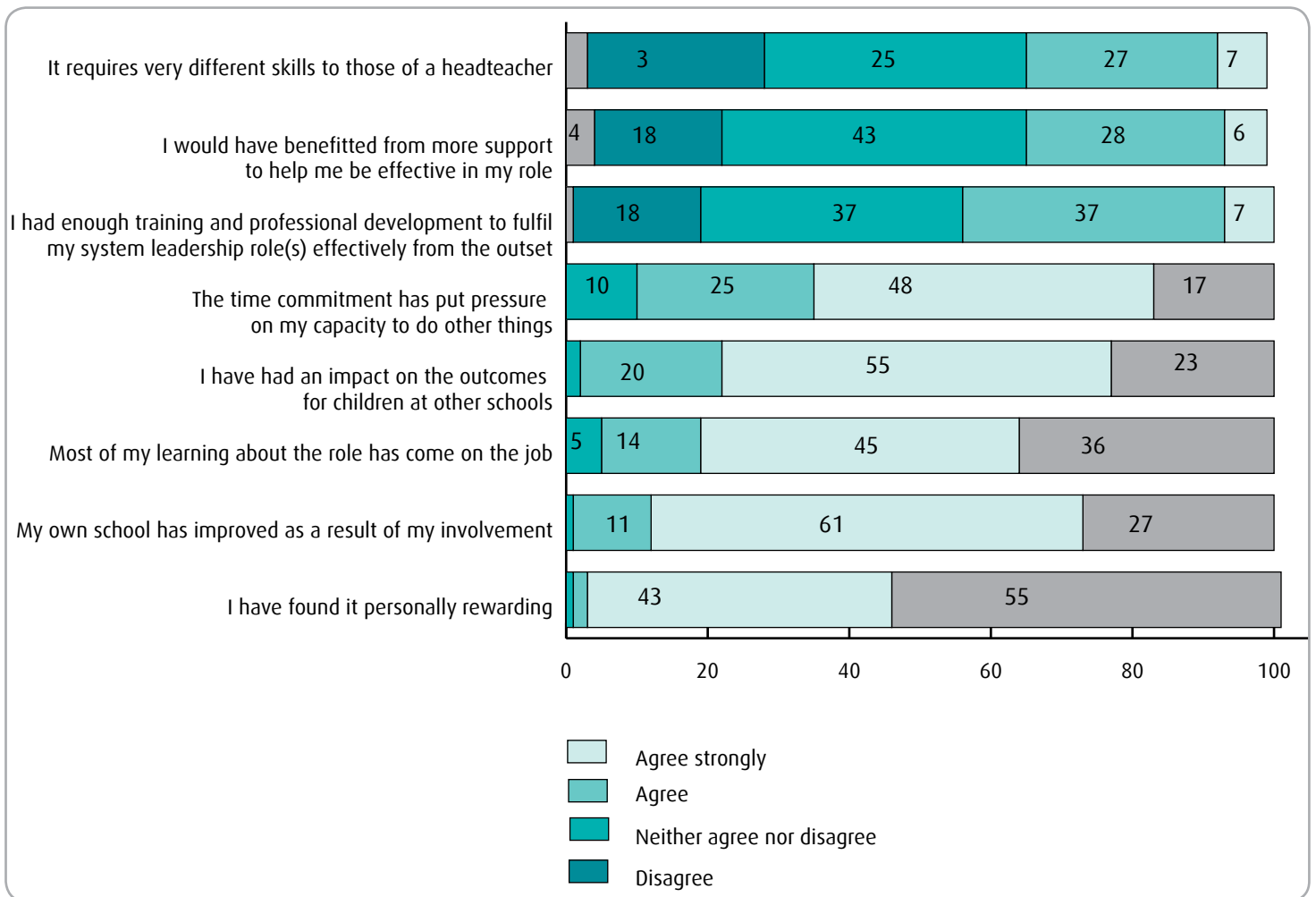
Source: Q5b – 'Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements'

Base: Online – all current system leaders (174)

Possession of skills

After discussing the skills that are the most important to them in their current and or preferred system leadership role, headteachers were asked to assess their confidence in their own skill levels on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means 'not at all confident' and 10 means 'completely confident'.

The results show that, typically, those who are in system leadership roles are much more confident in their skills than those who are not currently in a system leadership role. Table 6 summarises the possession of skills for those who are currently professional partners/headteacher mentors, SIPs, LLEs and NLEs.

Table 6: Confidence in skills: existing system leaders

Mean score out of 10 Base: all those currently doing each role	PP (108)	SIP (33)	LLE (48)	NLE (39)
Experience of being a headteacher	9.10	9.91	9.73	9.82
Direct experience of different types of schools	8.14	9.36	8.96	8.82
Knowledge/experience of policy and educational structures, including Ofsted and local authorities	8.22	9.15	8.67	8.77
Influencing and negotiation skills	8.52	9.18	9.19	9.38
A bank of case studies/best practice to call upon	7.48	8.21	7.88	7.56
Communication / presentation / interpersonal skills	8.79	9.21	9.25	9.23
Team-building skills	8.76	9.00	9.10	9.31
Ability to plan, setting goals and objectives	8.87	9.39	9.35	9.69
Coaching/mentoring skills	8.52	9.09	9.04	9.05
Data analysis skills	8.34	9.48	8.75	9.05
Strategic thinking ability (vision, big picture etc)	9.04	9.61	9.56	9.77
Access to further help and support structures including specific school intervention strategies such as the National Strategies Improving Schools Programme	7.53	8.42	7.71	8.03
Leading learning in other schools to raise attainment	7.75	8.82	8.69	9.03
Leading and manage change within other schools	7.78	8.94	8.75	9.08
Be able to rapidly identify and implement key priorities for school improvement	8.69	9.67	9.00	9.56
Developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools	8.07	9.12	8.98	9.31
Working effectively with pupils and parents from diverse backgrounds	8.18	8.61	8.27	8.59
Motivating and developing staff	8.76	9.27	9.19	9.38
Establishing effective behaviour management approaches in different school contexts	8.21	8.85	8.29	8.85

Base: Online – those currently doing each system leadership role

Source: Q2b – 'How confident are you now that have the following skills in place?'

Current system leaders have the highest level of confidence in their experience of being a headteacher, strategic thinking ability and ability to plan. Current headteacher mentors/professional partners generally tended to have less confidence in their abilities than current practitioners of the other three system leadership roles.

Table 7 summarises confidence in the possession of skills for those who are interested in becoming professional partners, SIPs, LLEs and NLEs.

Table 7: Confidence in skills: aspiring system leaders

Mean score out of 10 Base: all those currently doing each role	PP (124)	SIP (94)	LLE (69)	NLE (45)
Experience of being a headteacher	7.94	7.90	8.16	8.18
Direct experience of different types of schools	7.19	7.05	7.30	7.62
Knowledge/experience of policy and educational structures, including Ofsted and local authorities	7.30	7.38	7.39	7.56
Influencing and negotiation skills	7.64	7.93	8.09	7.87
A bank of case studies/best practice to call upon	6.20	6.62	6.88	6.76
Communication / presentation / interpersonal skills	8.35	8.54	8.39	8.22
Team-building skills	8.19	8.49	8.29	8.13
Ability to plan, setting goals and objectives	8.28	8.64	8.41	8.44
Coaching/mentoring skills	7.85	8.28	7.99	8.18
Data analysis skills	7.69	8.06	7.87	7.87
Strategic thinking ability (vision, big picture etc)	8.35	8.69	8.43	8.53
Access to further help and support structures including specific school intervention strategies such as the National Strategies Improving Schools Programme	6.64	6.94	6.83	7.04
Leading learning in other schools to raise attainment	6.33	6.73	7.17	7.36
Leading and manage change within other schools	6.43	6.68	7.10	7.27
Be able to rapidly identify and implement key priorities for school improvement	7.88	8.15	8.20	8.22
Developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools	7.20	7.35	7.59	7.89
Working effectively with pupils and parents from diverse backgrounds	7.73	7.79	7.86	7.67
Motivating and developing staff	8.26	8.41	8.36	8.40
Establishing effective behaviour management approaches in different school contexts	7.77	7.72	7.65	7.98

Base: Online – those currently interested in each system leadership role

Source: Q2b – 'How confident do you currently feel that you have the following skills in place to fulfil (INSERT ROLE) effectively?'

Skills gaps

Those wishing to undertake these system leadership roles feel that their main strengths are strategic thinking ability, ability to plan, communication/presentation/interpersonal skills, and motivating and developing staff skills. Their skills gaps (identified by measuring the gap between how important a skill is deemed to be and their self-assessed level of confidence in that skill) tend to centre on areas that require experience of other schools and knowledge of and access to policy and support. Clearly this can inhibit interest as they may feel both unlikely to be accepted for roles and, potentially, out of their depth within the role.

Skills gaps are identified as the difference between the importance of the skill and the level of confidence potential system leaders feel they currently have to perform the skill. Where there is a large gap between possession and importance of a skill, then training and development programmes would be beneficial in improving skills and confidence. Table 8 identifies potential skill gaps of current and potential system leaders. A minus score represents a potential skills gap (the higher the minus score the greater the gap). A skills gap does not necessarily mean they do not currently have this skill (eg experience of being a headteacher), but that they need more experience or need to develop more confidence in this skill when considering a system leadership role.

Professional partner

Table 8: Skills gaps for professional partners/headteacher mentors

	Current	Potential
Experience of being a headteacher	-.24	-1.4
Direct experience of different types of schools		-.71
Knowledge/experience of policy and educational structures	-.24	-1.16
Influencing and negotiation skills		-.88
A bank of case studies/best practice to call upon		-1.14
Communication/presentation/interpersonal skills	-.43	-.87
Team-building skills		-.27
Ability to plan, setting goals and objectives		-.51
Coaching/mentoring skills	-.31	-.98
Data analysis skills		-.42
Strategic thinking ability (vision, big picture etc)	-.17	-.86
Access to further help and support structures including specific school intervention strategies such as the National Strategies Improving Schools Programme	-.35	-1.29
Leading learning in other schools to raise attainment	-.25	-1.67
Leading and managing change within other schools	-.39	-1.64
Be able to rapidly identify and implement key priorities for school improvement	-.15	-.96
Developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools	-.61	-1.48
Working effectively with pupils and parents from diverse backgrounds		-.01
Motivating and developing staff	-.22	-.72
Establishing effective behaviour management approaches in different school contexts		-.98

Base: Currently performing professional partner/headteacher mentor role 'current'

Interested in performing professional partner/headteacher mentor role in the future potential'

The gaps for current professional partners/headteacher mentors are not significant due to generally high confidence levels. However, there are the following significant skills gaps for potential professional partners which are as follows:

— experience of being a headteacher

— knowledge of policy and educational structures

— a bank of case studies to call upon

— access to further help and support structures

— leading learning in other schools to raise attainment

— leading and managing change in other schools

— developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools

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Table 9: Skills gaps for LLEs

	Current	Potential
Experience of being a headteacher		-1.41
Direct experience of different types of schools		-.923
Knowledge/experience of policy and educational structures		-.95
Influencing and negotiation skills		-.94
A bank of case studies/best practice to call upon		-1.0
Communication/presentation/interpersonal skills	-.1	-.96
Team-building skills		-.45
Ability to plan, setting goals and objectives		-.73
Coaching/mentoring skills		-.98
Data analysis skills		-.63
Strategic thinking ability (vision, big picture etc)		-.94
Access to further help and support structures including specific school intervention strategies such as the National Strategies Improving Schools Programme	-.41	-1.29
Leading learning in other schools to raise attainment	-.17	-1.69
Leading and managing change within other schools	-.09	-1.74
Be able to rapidly identify and implement key priorities for school improvement	-.15	-.95
Developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools	-.02	-1.41
Working effectively with pupils and parents from diverse backgrounds		-.002
Motivating and developing staff		-.53
Establishing effective behaviour management approaches in different school contexts		-.41

Base: Currently performing LLE role 'current'

Interested in performing LLE role in the future 'potential'

There are the following significant skills gaps for potential LLEs:

— experience of being a headteacher

— a bank of case studies to call upon

— access to further help and support structures

— leading learning in other schools to raise attainment

— leading and managing change in other schools

— developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools

— School improvement partner

Table 10: Skills gaps for SIPs

	Current	Potential
Experience of being a headteacher		-1.48
Direct experience of different types of schools		-1.3
Knowledge/experience of policy and educational structures		-1.69
Influencing and negotiation skills		-.69
A bank of case studies/best practice to call upon		-1.38
Communication/presentation/interpersonal skills		-0.62
Team-building skills		
Ability to plan, setting goals and objectives		-.29
Coaching/mentoring skills		-.32
Data analysis skills		-1.13
Strategic thinking ability (vision, big picture etc)		-.42
Access to further help and support structures including specific school intervention strategies such as the National Strategies Improving Schools Programme		-1.36
Leading learning in other schools to raise attainment		-1.49
Leading and managing change within other schools		-1.49
Be able to rapidly identify and implement key priorities for school improvement		-1.09
Developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools		-1.22
Working effectively with pupils and parents from diverse backgrounds		
Motivating and developing staff		
Establishing effective behaviour management approaches in different school contexts		

Base: Currently performing LLE role 'current'

Interested in performing LLE role in the future 'potential'

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There are the following significant skills gaps for potential SIPs:

— experience of being a headteacher

— direct experience of different types of schools

— knowledge of policy and educational structures

— influence and negotiation skills

— a bank of case studies to call upon

— data analysis skills

— access to further help and support structures

— leading learning in other schools to raise attainment

— leading and managing change in other schools

— ability to rapidly identify and implement key priorities for school improvement

— developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools

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Table 11: Skills gaps for NLEs

	Current	Potential
Experience of being a headteacher		-1.36
Direct experience of different types of schools		-.61
Knowledge/experience of policy and educational structures		-.83
Influencing and negotiation skills		-1.48
A bank of case studies/best practice to call upon	-.19	-.99
Communication/presentation/interpersonal skills	-.25	-1.26
Team-building skills		-.87
Ability to plan, setting goals and objectives		-.89
Coaching/mentoring skills		-.76
Data analysis skills		-.83
Strategic thinking ability (vision, big picture etc)		-1.09
Access to further help and support structures including specific school intervention strategies such as the National Strategies Improving Schools Programme	-.16	-1.15
Leading learning in other schools to raise attainment		-1.56
Leading and managing change within other schools	-.07	-1.28
Be able to rapidly identify and implement key priorities for school improvement		-1.29
Developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools	-.04	-1.46
Working effectively with pupils and parents from diverse backgrounds		-1.17
Motivating and developing staff		-.77
Establishing effective behaviour management approaches in different school contexts		-.27

Base: Currently performing NLE role 'current'

Interested in performing NLE role in the future 'potential'

There are the following significant skills gaps for potential NLEs:

— experience of being a headteacher

— influence and negotiation skills

— communication/presentation/interpersonal skills

— strategic thinking ability

— access to further help and support structures

— leading learning in other schools to raise attainment

— leading and managing change in other schools

— ability to rapidly identify and implement key priorities for school improvement

— developing a culture of learning and high expectations within other schools

— working effectively with pupils and parents from diverse backgrounds

Conclusions and recommendations

Establishing system leadership is a work in progress.

Just under three-quarters of headteachers have undertaken a system leadership role at some time, and 63 per cent are currently doing so. As terminology, though, 'system leadership' is not yet well established and some system leadership roles are not yet consistently well known (the SIP role being the obvious exception to this). As many headteachers are not yet familiar with many of the system leadership roles – especially LLE and NLE – some form of foundation course or reference material could be developed to introduce the various roles and the skills required. This could signpost the development required to undertake the role successfully.

Positively, the benefits potential system leaders are looking for as a reason to be involved in system leadership are realised by current system leaders.

Potential system leaders feel that the primary benefits associated with undertaking a system leadership role are that it may improve my own school and their own personal development; it is therefore a very positive finding that among current system leaders, 98 per cent found their involvement personally rewarding and 88 per cent felt their own school had improved through their involvement.

System leadership is often seen as a progressive pathway and experience is key.

The system leadership role that holds the greatest level of interest for headteachers is the professional partner role with 92 per cent (of those who are not currently a headteacher mentor/professional partner) interested in undertaking this role in the future. This reflects a number of things: that this is seen as the first and most accessible step to system leadership; the clarity of the role in terms of what it entails; that the opportunity to help other, less experienced school leaders is a palpably important and valuable role; and it is the kind of role that can readily be accommodated alongside existing headship responsibilities.

Barriers preventing greater uptake of system leadership roles included a self-perceived lack of experience and that it would detract from [their] role as a head (ie, there are concerns over their time and capacity to undertake multiple roles; this appears to be a particular concern for those who are relatively new to headship or who are working in especially challenging circumstances). This lack of confidence will often reflect experience that may be confined to their own school or a very limited range of schools; for example, many feel it would be hard to be head of a rural primary school giving informed and credible advice to a head of an inner-city primary school in special measures.

The depth interviews suggest that a good proportion of headteachers can be expected, once on the system leadership pathway, to pursue other system leadership roles if approached and supported in the right way: many do see a natural progression through system leadership roles – related to confidence and experience – and consideration of roles reflects this mindset and where they currently are on that pathway. This is a positive finding since it implies that a career pathway and succession planning route for system leadership is emerging.

Core skills across roles can be similar, but some roles are more complex than others.

The skills required of system leaders can often be consistent across roles – experience of being a headteacher, communication skills, strategic thinking ability and the ability to identify and implement key priorities for school improvement tending to figure prominently; only the SIP role really sits apart in terms of the skills required. However some roles are seen as structurally and practically more complex than others; for roles such as the LLE and NLE (as opposed to, say, a professional partner), the responsibilities, reporting lines and (perceived) consequences and impact of involvement are more far-reaching and, as such, require more engagement, commitment, experience and formalised knowledge of policy, options, systems and structures.

There is clear scope to support development.

Current system leaders are by and large confident that they possess the skills required to be effective in their system leadership role(s). However, it is important to note that 78 per cent of current system leaders do not disagree that they would have benefited from more support to help them be effective in their role and 56 per cent did not agree that they had received enough training and professional development to fulfil their system leadership roles effectively from the outset. So there is room for more support. As system leaders look (to some extent retrospectively) at what can help them in performing their role, the three emergent priority areas are:

— access to an experienced coach/mentor to offer support

— a support network of others in a similar role

— a formal induction to the role

Although not as strongly indicated, there is some support for case studies and a library of best practice as well.

Unsurprisingly, potential system leaders (ie, those who are interested in a system leadership role in the future but are not currently in role), are considerably less confident about their skills. Here the National College can provide more focused support and development programmes to address their specific concerns and perceived skills (and/or experience) gaps.

Summary of specific recommendations

To cater to those who are in role:

Deliver and facilitate the support that enables challenges to be tackled as and when they arise:

— networking opportunities among those who are in similar roles to share experiences and best practice

— access to an experienced mentor, especially if relatively new to role

— access to a bank of case studies or library of experiences, ideas and potential solutions

To cater to those who are considering a role:

Build confidence and understanding:

— contextualising the role – what it is, what is required and expected, likely challenges and solutions, sources of information and assistance

To cater to those who are not yet considering a role:

Raise awareness:

— visible pathway into and through system leadership

— foundation course or reference material that introduces the various roles and the skills and experience required, and that can provide or signpost the required development

References

HM Government, 2009, *Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system*, Cm7588, Norwich, The Stationery Office

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The College gives its members the professional development and recognition they need to build their careers and support those they work with. Members are part of a community of thousands of other leaders - exchanging ideas, sharing good practice and working together to make a bigger difference for children and young people.

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