Viewpoint

Appeal of the roller-coaster job

In a recent article, Michael Austin observed that the number of applicants for the post of FE principal has declined considerably (FE Focus, June 28). While, even five years ago, such vacancies attracted 60 or 70 people, they are now seeing numbers of 10 to 20 apply.

Our research for the Centre for Excellence in Leadership confirms the sharp decline. But it questions Austin's explanations for these underlying trends.

He says that conformity and compliance are encouraged, not flair and innovation. He further argues that government performance targets preclude the need for principals to make tough decisions, which takes excitement from the job which, he says, has "lost its lustre".

However, our research based on interviews with 140 employees from principal through lecturer uncovered a rather different set of reasons for this.

Yes, targets are extensive and there is certainly more centralised control on principals than previously. But the general perception was that the job of principal was highly challenging and increasingly stressful. It was the excessive nature of the role that employers repeatedly said put them off applying.

Our project explored how leadership is distributed and experienced at various hierarchical levels. The research revealed high-staff motivation and dedication, a preferred leadership style based on consultation wherever possible: a widespread recognition that praise is a key staff motivator, and a unanimous view about the vital importance of effective leadership.

Equally, our findings showed that colleges make important, but frequently underestimated, contributions to the local economy.

Engagement with multiple communities within the college and outside created a constant challenge for effective FE leadership. The research also highlighted some of the contradictory effects of the audit culture that now pervades the sector.

While formalised processes are designed to raise standards, increasing accountability and transparency, an excessive audit culture can also produce unintended and counter-productive effects that may erode the potential for effective leadership. This is particularly the case when measurement systems and targets cut across each other.

As one principal said: "There are a lot of pressures from outside, a multitude of targets and, at times, conflicting pressures. There are real pressures to achieve phenomenal targets. Nobody objects to being accountable, but this constant changing of the goalposts is very difficult. Funding regimes in FE are highly complex. Current funding practices such as unexpected blockages and short-term pressures create considerable turbulence that may undermine consistency and long-term planning. Rather than helping bring some order, these external pressures significantly intensify uncertainty, stress and the volume of work generally."

Principals argued that their increasingly diverse, intensified and pressured workload was now a significant barrier to senior and middle managers applying to be principals.

Far from being seen as the work easier, these multiple and sometimes conflicting pressures appeared to many respondents to render the job of principal highly stressful, and in some cases seemingly impossible.

One member of a senior management team said: "I could never do the principal's job. It is so diverse. You have to know what goes on in the college, what is happening in the region, what is going on at a political level. You need to be out in the community, seem to be active at all levels within the college, keep up to date with the constant changes from the politicians, deal with all the Government bodies and manage the finances. It is an impossible job."

Given principals' increasing responsibilities, providing a systems approach to career succession planning would seem of great importance in preparing the next generation of leaders.

Our research identified the extremely able staff, particularly at the level of head of department or divisional manager, who demonstrated the ability to manage a variety of tasks in a highly competent manner while also contributing new ideas and creating systems that helped the smooth running of their departments.

We would suggest that leadership succession planning should be more closely combined with leadership development and certification programmes, and designed in ways that can identify and encourage talented staff at levels of department or divisional level - and not just concentrate on those people in senior management teams.

Our research suggests that many incumbents and potential candidates considered the job of principal as having too many challenges rather than too few. An important effect of excessive auditing, inconsistent funding and multiple community engagement is a growing disillusionment for qualified candidates to apply for principal vacancies.

In contrast with Mike Austin's contention that "the whole knuckle - exciting but the bit behind the scenes is far more daunting", our research suggests that the roller-coaster metaphor continues to be a fairly accurate description for the work of FE principals.

No one we interviewed at any level considered the job of principal to be so comfortable and routine that it was not some exciting and challenging, in fact quite the opposite.

Professor David Collinson is national research director at the Centre for Excellence in Leadership, Lancaster university management school.