The Balancing Act:
report on the working lives of deputy and assistant head teachers and vice principals

July 2016
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NAHT and NAHT Edge Deputy and assistant head teachers and vice principals survey 2016

We know that nothing drives and sustains improvement in education more than high quality leadership. We also know that there is a problem with recruitment at the moment, although we argue whether to describe it as a ‘challenge’ or a ‘crisis’. Critically, the government seems in a state of denial on this issue.

Not enough is being done to guarantee that teacher supply is sufficient and that the next generation of school leaders are coming through the system, ready, willing and able to provide the high quality leadership which we know is vital.

We must do all we can to provide attractive opportunities for deputies, assistants and vice principals.

As things stand, just a third of the people we surveyed had any aspiration to become head teachers. That is just not going to give us the number of head teachers we will need in the future. The workload, the risk and the culture of blame that surrounds school leadership make up a toxic fog that must be lifted. The fault lies with the government’s obsession with high stakes accountability. As one respondent to our survey said: “I feel that the government is setting us up to fail with ridiculous targets for performance as part of the wider agenda on academies.”

The vast majority of people who responded to our survey teach in the classroom alongside their leadership role. This is the ‘balancing act’ that deputies, assistants and vice principals face. The effort required to balance the competing priorities of teaching, marking, leadership, training and a happy home life creates real dilemmas. Something has to give and, up to now, it has too often been the desire to take the top job.

School leadership is a privilege, an opportunity to do good on a scale and to a depth that few other professions offer. We want people to experience this and to step up whatever the climate. So the findings of this report are accompanied by recommendations which NAHT and NAHT Edge believe will go some way to solving this problem.

Chiefly, for all schools to be able to run effectively, the government must commit to sufficient funding.

It is critical that the DfE should honour the commitments it made in response to the 2015 Workload Challenge Action Plan and the independent Teacher Workload Review Group.

There also needs to be recognition that the transition towards academy status for all schools will present a significant time burden for leadership teams, especially in small schools. Long periods of distraction from the core purpose of the school must be avoided.

Finally, the report identifies a role for the newly created Foundation for Leadership as a forum for debate, a source of support and a means to safeguard the quality of school leadership in the future.

We will be presenting the findings of this report to the DfE and urging them to work constructively with us on addressing the challenges associated with recruitment and retention.
Introduction and overview

In order to support the implementation of the conference motion on deputy and assistant heads’ and principals’ responsibilities from the 2015 NAHT conference, a survey was sent to all deputy and assistant head and vice principal members about their workload. The survey asked about the balance of their teaching and management responsibilities. It was sent to members in England from 4 February to 21 March 2016 and received 849 responses (796 from England, 28 from Wales and 25 from Northern Ireland). This report outlines the key findings from the completed surveys in England.

This report also looks specifically at areas where there are significant differences in responses from:

• deputy and assistant heads and vice-principals
• primary and secondary schools
• maintained schools and academies
• different sizes of schools
• schools with an ‘outstanding’ or ‘good’ Ofsted grading and those with either a ‘requires improvement’ or an ‘inadequate’ grading.

Recommendations

1. This report highlights that middle and senior leaders in schools and academies are struggling to balance teaching and leadership responsibilities. Budget pressures and the pace of change in schools have meant many senior leaders are maintaining a significant teaching workload while their leadership responsibilities have grown. This is untenable and must be addressed if we are to encourage teachers into senior leadership roles and retain the middle and senior leaders already in those roles. **NAHT will campaign for the Department for Education (DfE) to research this issue and to set minimum expectations for the amount of dedicated leadership time given to different roles and settings.**

2. At the heart of these pressures in many schools is the struggle with funding that prevents schools from providing the amount of leadership time required to support the school. The current government funding commitment to protect school funding in cash terms has already resulted in severe cuts in real terms, and will lead to a further cut in the actual value of funding per pupil of eight per cent over the next four years. **For all schools to be able to run effectively, the government must commit to sufficient funding.**
3. There is also a case for schools and academies to review the pattern of middle and senior leaders being pulled out of their classrooms to deliver leadership responsibilities and, where this is frequent and disruptive, review the balance of their teaching and leadership responsibilities.

4. Deputy and assistant heads and principals reported that planning the implementation of educational changes has a significant impact on their leadership time, and that of their head teachers and principals. **It is critical to minimise this, and that the DfE should honour the commitments it made in response to the recent 2015 Workload Challenge Action Plan.** and the independent Teacher Workload Review Group to:

   - A protocol setting out minimum lead-in times for significant curriculum, qualifications and accountability changes and not to change qualifications mid-course. The independent review group recommended a review of this DfE protocol to ensure it is still fit for purpose, and that it takes full regard of the workload implications of any change.
   - Commit to sufficient lead-in times for changes for which the sector will have to undertake significant planning to implement. This includes releasing relevant materials in good time.
   - Secure an Ofsted commitment not to change the inspection handbook or framework during the school year.

5. There needs to be recognition that **the transition towards academisation will present a significant time burden for leadership teams, especially in small schools.** Care must be taken to allow schools enough time to consider this issue if we are to avoid long periods of distraction from the core purpose of the school.

6. Only just over a third (36 per cent) of respondents aspired to headship in the future, with the rest not sure or definitely not interested. When asked what would make them feel more confident to move into a headship role, the most important point for deputies was to have no inspection in their first year, closely followed by not being held accountable for the past performance of the school. This highlights that **the punitive accountability framework may be the key factor deterring deputies from headship.** This needs to be addressed by Ofsted and employers if we are to encourage high performing professionals into headship. Whilst there is currently an option for new head teachers of schools judged ‘requires improvement’ to discuss the timing of their first inspection with their Ofsted Regional Director, there is no guarantee that they will be protected. Ofsted needs to revisit this issue.

7. Deputy and assistant heads and vice principals still value the leadership development programmes that have been offered by the National College. As the College moves away from overall control of these programmes, **it is important for the profession to ensure the integrity and quality of leadership programmes are retained and developed.** There is an important role for the NAHT backed Foundation for Leadership in Education to take this forward.
Key findings

- The vast majority (88 per cent) of deputy and assistant heads and vice principals who responded to the survey taught in the classroom as part of their role; although the amount of time they spent teaching varied significantly depending on their role and the type and size of their school.

- Secondary school respondents had much less time allocated to teaching responsibilities, with only 22 per cent spending more than half their time teaching while most primary respondents, 59 per cent, reported that more than half of their time was spent teaching.

- When asked how often they were pulled away from teaching responsibilities to fulfil their leadership commitments, due to both unforeseen circumstances (i.e. emergencies) and to planned absences, 29 per cent said they had to leave their teaching responsibilities once a week or more due to planned absences, while 47 per cent needed to leave the classroom once a week or more for unforeseen circumstances.

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Furthermore, 10 per cent said they had to leave their teaching responsibilities on a daily basis due to unforeseen circumstances. Where such occurrences happen daily, the disruption to the class will be significant and implies the teaching workload of those senior leaders is too high to deal with their leadership responsibilities. What is concerning is that over half, 54 per cent, reported this has grown over the last three years.

The problem was much greater for senior leaders in small schools with 34 per cent of those in small schools reporting they were likely to have to leave their teaching responsibilities for a planned absence at least once a week; and 59 per cent being pulled out due to an unplanned occurrence at least once a week.

Almost two thirds (62 per cent) said they were prevented from carrying out their teaching responsibilities up to 20 per cent of the time (i.e. the equivalent of their allocated time on one day per week) because of leadership duties; and over half (54 per cent) said this has increased over the last three years.

This left the majority of respondents feeling concerned about the impact on their pupils as 82 per cent agreed with the statement “the time I’m away from the classroom has a negative impact on the learning of pupils in my class”.

The survey also shows that those absences are generally for less than a day, so that deputy and assistant heads have frequent short absences from their classroom. When they are out, they are generally covered by other teacher colleagues, a supply teacher (for planned absences) or a higher level teaching assistant (HLTA). In discussions with members, they made the point that frequently being out of class for short emergency events is much more disruptive than a longer period for which proper cover can be found through a supply teacher.

72 per cent of members received less than 11 hours of dedicated leadership time per week and 15 per cent received none, despite having leadership responsibilities.

Most respondents had additional school responsibilities as part of their role. Most commonly, 61 per cent are the designated person for child protection. This also contributes to those leaders being pulled out of their teaching responsibilities to deal with urgent safeguarding issues, although other roles, such as SENCO or head of department or year, can also result in frequent emergency situations.

One of the main reasons deputies and assistants are pulled away from their teaching responsibilities is to cover when the head or principal is absent working away from the school. The majority (70 per cent) of respondents reported an increase in the amount of time that the head or principal was out of school, requiring them to step up and in some cases abandon their teaching responsibilities. This reflects the growing expectation of system leadership, and of heads and principals focusing more of their time outside their own school. But this survey shows the pressure is being felt by assistant and deputies/vice-principals who have to juggle increased leadership responsibilities alongside significant teaching time.

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We discussed this finding with a group of deputy and assistant heads who suggested that the unprecedented pace of change in schools over the last few years’ has had a significant impact on head teachers, principals and senior leaders as they need to focus on exploring options for implementation that often take them out of school. For example, considering which of the reception baselines to adopt meant that school leaders had to attend sessions to understand the respective benefits of each.

Members expressed concern that the transition to academisation will be a further pull on senior leadership time as they explore options for partners and structures, and go through the necessary bureaucratic steps. This could lead to head teachers being pulled away from school to a greater extent with resulting pressure on their deputies, vice principals and assistants.

The fact that 84 of respondents work 50 or more hours per week, and 40 per cent work 60 hours or more, illustrates their commitment and passion for their job and the children they work with – but at a significant personal cost.

A notable point is that only five per cent of respondents worked part-time – considerably less than the average 23 per cent across the teaching workforce – and suggests that there are barriers to flexible working for senior leaders in schools that may deter some teachers from considering such roles.

36% aspire to headship
24% aren’t sure
40% don’t aspire to headship

Only just over a third (36 per cent) of respondents aspired to headship in the future, but the rest are either not sure or definitely not interested. An interesting point is that of those who are not sure, 22 per cent felt confident they could deliver the role now – so they are already able to perform the role but it is not attractive to them.

When asked what would make them feel more confident about moving into a headship role, the most important point for deputies was to have no inspection in their first year, closely followed by not being held accountable for the past performance of the school. This highlights that the punitive accountability framework may be the key factor deterring deputies from headship.

When asked about professional development, almost one third (30 per cent) reported that their continued professional development (CPD) had declined over the last year, largely due to time (67 per cent) and budget (52 per cent) constraints.

The survey also showed that the national college leadership qualifications are still important to this group; with 56 per cent having studied for one; and the majority rating the courses as useful. Of those without these qualifications, 47 per cent are keen to study for the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH).

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In terms of their role, 64 per cent are deputy head teachers or vice principals and 32 per cent are assistant heads. When compiling the results, those who said that they are head of school have been included with those who indicated they are a deputy head teacher. Similarly, we have combined findings from assistant head teachers with those of heads of teaching and learning, and heads of education.

The majority of the respondents, 79 per cent, work in the primary phase of education and 16 per cent in the secondary phase. The remaining five per cent are from all-through schools. When compiling the number of respondents from primary schools, we also included those who work in a nursery, infant or junior school. Similarly, the report includes middle schools and further education colleges with secondary school respondents.

The vast majority (83 per cent) of respondents are from schools that were judged to be ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ at their last Ofsted inspection and 17 per cent are from schools judged to be ‘requires improvement’ or ‘inadequate’. This is similar to the national average of 84 per cent of schools being ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’.

Most of those who completed the survey, 67 per cent, work in maintained schools (community, voluntary aided, voluntary controlled and foundation schools). While 26 per cent are from academies (multi academy trusts, standalone academies and free schools). Three per cent are from special non-maintained schools and three per cent from independent schools. See table 1 below for a detailed breakdown of the respondents’ type of institution.

Almost all respondents (95 per cent) said they work full-time. This is much higher than the 77 per cent of teachers who work full-time nationally (source: School Workforce in England: November 2014) and reflects the fact that senior leaders are much less likely to work part-time. It is not clear if this is through personal choice or if additional barriers prevent senior leaders working flexibly.

Divided by school size, 38 per cent of respondents work in small schools (under 250 pupils), 48 per cent work in medium sized schools (between 251 and 650 pupils) and 14 per cent work in large schools (over 651 pupils).
Balancing teaching and leadership responsibilities

When asked about their roles and responsibilities 88 per cent said they teach as part of their role. This figure was slightly higher for assistant head teachers (95 per cent) compared with deputy heads (84 per cent).

When asked how many hours per week are allocated to dedicated leadership time, 69 per cent of deputy heads/vice principals said they have 11 hours or less compared with 79 per cent of assistant head teachers. Of those in small schools, 81 per cent receive 11 hours or less compared with 72 per cent in medium size schools and 65 per cent in large schools. This is unsurprising as small schools have more limited budgets.

Members were asked what percentage of their time is allocated to teaching. Secondary school respondents had much lower teaching responsibilities, with only 22 per cent indicating that more than half their time is allocated to teaching. Responses from primary participants reflect almost a mirror image, with most (59 per cent) indicating that more than half of their time is allocated to teaching. This is demonstrated in chart 2.

In maintained schools 56 per cent said that 50 per cent or more of their time is allocated to teaching, compared with 41 per cent in academies. But this will also reflect the fact that more academies have been secondary schools. When analysed by role, the figure was higher for assistant heads than deputies and vice principals (57 per cent and 48 per cent respectively).

Chart 1: Percentage of members that said how many hours per week of dedicated leadership time they received by the size of school they work in.
Most respondents (84 per cent) work 50 or more hours per week (or full-time equivalent if part-time) and 40 per cent work 60 hours or more. As demonstrated in chart 4, of those who work 60 hours or more:

- 39 per cent of deputies/vice principals work more than 60 hours per week
- 42 per cent of assistant head teachers work more than 60 hours per week
When asked what specific responsibilities members hold (this can be more than one), 61 per cent of respondents are the designated person for child protection and 37 per cent are a head of department. This also contributes to those leaders being pulled out of their teaching responsibilities to deal with urgent safeguarding issues, although other roles, such as SENCO or head of department or year, can also result in frequent emergency situations. Chart 5 demonstrates the answers in full.

Breaking this down by role, the most common responsibilities for deputies/vice-principals are designated person for child protection (71 per cent) and budgetary responsibilities (32 per cent). For assistant heads, the most common positions are head of department (52 per cent), and child protection (42 per cent).

These responsibilities could be even more wide ranging in a special school. Rick, who works in a Special Academy in Cheshire, explained the extent of responsibilities he has in his role. These included management of medication in school and transport coordination, as well as more common roles such as procurement, staff management and behavior monitoring.
The survey asked members with teaching responsibilities, how frequently they are asked to leave the classroom to deliver their leadership commitments. Of these, 29 per cent said they have to leave their teaching responsibilities once a week or more due to planned absences and 47 per cent said they have to do so once a week or more for unforeseen circumstances. The number of respondents having to leave their class more frequently than once a week was much higher for emergencies than planned absence; 10 per cent had to leave their class once a day to deal with emergencies, while only two per cent left once a day for planned absences. Where such occurrences are daily, it would seem there may be a bigger problem with covering the leadership responsibilities in the school.

A similar result was shown with deputy heads and vice principals - 29 per cent said this occurred once a week or more due to planned absences and 48 per cent said it was due to unforeseen circumstances. Of assistant heads, 26 per cent said they have to leave their class once a week or more due planned absence and 44 per cent due to unforeseen circumstances.

Those who work in small schools are more likely to have to leave their teaching responsibilities than those in a large school, but they are also the leaders with the largest teaching responsibility. From small schools, 34 per cent of respondents said they are likely to have to leave their teaching responsibilities for a planned absence once a week or more and 59 per cent for an unplanned absence. While just 16 per cent of those in large schools have to leave their teaching responsibilities due to planned absences once a week or more and 29 per cent for unplanned absences.

One respondent explained that in his school they try to avoid classroom absences by planning ahead and prioritising time in the classroom:

“It is rare for teaching responsibilities to be foregone for leadership responsibilities because we prioritise classroom delivery and we have a daily rota of SLT that are available to deal with emergencies and other daily issues that might otherwise impact on teaching. We also pro-actively seek CPD opportunities that do not clash with teaching responsibilities and, in a small SLT, employ a practice of not allowing more than one member of SLT to be absent for meetings etc. at any time.”

Nick, Leicestershire
As the head teacher’s absence from school to deliver other responsibilities is a common reason for the deputy or assistant to step up, the survey asked if the amount of time the head teacher is out of school has changed over the last three years. Or those who responded, 70 per cent said there had been an increase in the amount of time their head teacher is out of school and 36 per cent reported a significant increase. This was higher for respondents working in academies – 43 per cent compared with 34 per cent in the maintained sector.

We discussed this finding with a group of deputy and assistant heads who suggested that the unprecedented pace of change in schools over the last few years has had a significant impact on head teachers, principals and senior leaders as the need to focus on exploring options for implementation often takes them out of school. For example, considering which of the reception baselines to adopt means school leaders have to attend sessions to understand the respective benefits of each.

Members expressed concern that the transition to academisation will be a further pull on senior leaders’ time as they explore options for partners and structures, and go through the necessary bureaucratic steps. So this could lead to head teachers being pulled away from school to a greater extent with resulting pressure on their deputies and assistants.
When asked, ‘in the last three years have you been required to take on the role of acting head teacher on an ongoing basis without a formal change to your contract’, 22 per cent of respondents said they had. Breaking this down, 26 per cent of deputy heads said yes, compared with 15 per cent of assistant heads. And 24 per cent of primary school respondents said yes compared with 13 per cent of secondary school respondents. These results are reflected in chart 8.

The survey asked respondents what percentage of time they are prevented from carrying out teaching responsibilities because of their leadership and management duties. Overall, most respondents (62 per cent) said this occurred 20 per cent of the time or less (i.e. the equivalent of their allocated time on one day per week), while 36 per cent said 10 per cent or less. When looking at the size of school, 19 per cent said this never happened in a large school compared with 11 per cent reporting it never happened in a small school.

Following on from the previous question, the survey asked if this amount of time had changed over the last three years. Overall, 54 per cent said there had been an increase, although 40 per cent said there had been no change. When comparing results by school size, 61 per cent of small schools said there had been an increase, compared with 53 per cent in medium size schools and 47 per cent in large schools.

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Respondents were asked the longest period of time they had been unable to teach their own classes because of leadership and management duties. Overall, the largest group of respondents (43 per cent) said this had happened for less than one day. When comparing the results from deputy heads and assistant heads, results indicate that deputies are slightly more likely to be prevented from teaching their classes for longer periods, with 62 per cent of deputies saying this had happened for more than a day compared with 50 per cent of assistant heads. This is shown below in chart 10.

Respondents in small schools are also more likely to be away from their classes for longer periods, with 60 per cent saying this had happened more than once a day compared with 45 per cent in large schools. In discussions with members, they made the point that being out of class for lots of short emergency events is much more disruptive for pupils than a longer period for which proper cover can be found through a supply teacher.

Chart 9: Length of time those required to take on the role of acting head without a formal change to their contract had to take up the position

Chart 10: The longest period of time deputy and assistant heads were unable to teach their own classes because of leadership and management duties
Impact of the respondents’ absence on their teaching responsibilities

Chart 11: How respondents teaching responsibilities are covered when they perform their leadership responsibilities

Most respondents said their class was covered by other teacher colleagues, a supply teacher or a HLTA. The survey asked respondents to what extent they agree with the statement “the time I’m away from the classroom has a negative impact on the learning of pupils in my class” and 82 per cent either strongly agreed or agreed. The results are set out in chart 12 below.

Chart 12: “The time I’m away from the classroom has a negative impact on the learning of pupils in my class”
The survey asked if respondents aspire to headship in the future. Overall 36 per cent said that they did and 64 per cent said either no or that they weren’t sure. Slightly more deputies/vice-principals aspire to headship compared with assistants (39 per cent compared with 32 per cent). The figure was higher in academies (40 per cent) than maintained schools (34 per cent). It was also higher in small schools (40 per cent) compared to large schools (28 per cent) as demonstrated in chart 13 below.

Chart 13: How much respondents aspire to leadership in the future, by size of school.

The survey then asked when respondents would feel confident to move into a headship role. For those who answered yes to the previous question (if they aspire to headship in the future) 36 per cent said they would feel confident to take on the role now and 26 per cent said they feel confident in the next three years. Of those who said they were not sure, 22 per cent said they would feel confident to take on the role now and 30 per cent said they would within the next three years. This highlights that some senior leaders, who know they could become head teachers, are nevertheless not aspiring to headship.

When asked what they would need to make them feel more confident about moving into headship, shadowing was the most popular response for assistant heads at 56 per cent, while no inspection in their first year was most popular with deputies and vice principals at 58 per cent. Currently there is an option for new head teachers of schools judged ‘requires improvement’ to discuss the timing of their first inspection with their Ofsted Regional Director, but there is no guarantee that they will be protected. These results are set out in chart 14.

When asking members what uncertainties they had about taking up headship, one respondent explained:

“You need to, ‘sell your soul’ to be a head and I want to be able to conduct as normal a life as possible away from school... I don’t feel that there is enough freedom to run a school as best fits the community it serves. I feel that the government is setting us up to fail with ridiculous targets for performance as part of the wider agenda to academies... Recruitment crisis, who wants to be heading up organisations that don’t attract the best people.”

Steve, Kent
Another respondent explained what prevented her from applying for headship:

“I am currently looking for a new position so am considering a headship, however, many of the schools in my LA are in Requires Improvement, I have asked how much support would be available to the prospective new Head and the answer has been very vague, or the Governor who has shown me around the school doesn’t know the answer. This has put me off from applying for a headship.”

Christine, London

Chart 14: What would make deputy and assistant head teachers feel more confident about moving into headship
When asked about training, 39 per cent of members in secondary schools accessed external CPD once a term compared to 49 per cent in primary. This is likely to be because large schools have bigger staff teams to deliver training to colleagues, or can justify bringing external trainers into the school. The full results are outlined below in chart 15 and show if the CPD was internal within the school, external or online.

The survey asked respondents if their CPD has declined over the last year. Overall 30 per cent said yes and 70 per cent said no or not sure. The results across respondent roles and types of school all showed a similar response to this question.

Chart 15: How often respondents access CPD by their position and by school phase

Those who indicated their CPD has declined in the past year were asked why this had happened. Most respondents (67 per cent) blamed time constraints and 52 per cent said budget constraints. This is significant in reinforcing our previous points about how middle and senior leaders are increasingly hard pressed to deliver their roles. The full data is outlined in chart 16.
One respondent highlighted that the decline in CPD can also be caused by the wide variation between schools:

“I used to work in a school that focused strongly on CPD. Almost every other staff meeting throughout the year was CPD. This was either done internally by our own staff or we brought in outside agencies/advisers who could deliver it for us.

“In Sept 2015 I moved to a new school which would say that it focused on CPD but in reality, each staff meeting was simply a gathering of teachers to talk about a particular topic. Mostly it was a waste of time as no decisions were ever made and very little training was delivered. Thankfully I have moved on.”

Denise, Newcastle

The survey asked if respondents have studied for a leadership qualification. Overall 56 per cent have done so (57 per cent of deputy head teachers and 55 per cent of assistant heads). When analysing the responses by those who indicated they aspire to leadership in the future, 64 per cent of those who do aspire to headship have studied for a leadership qualification. As expected, the figure was lower for those who don’t aspire to headship or aren’t sure, at 52 per cent. These results are outlined in chart 17.
Chart 17: Comparison of respondents who are interested in studying for a leadership qualification with those who aspire to headship in the future.

Chart 18: Courses respondents have studied

For those who studied for a leadership qualification, we asked which course they studied and to rate its usefulness from 1 to 5 (where 1 is very useful). Most respondents had completed the NPQH and gave it a rating of either 1 or 2. Chart 19 demonstrates the answers to this question. Those who hadn’t studied for a leadership qualification were asked if they are interested in doing so, and 53 per cent said yes.
For those who do not have a leadership qualification, the survey asked what qualification they would be interested in studying; 47 per cent are interested in studying for an NPQH and 31 per cent said they weren’t sure what qualifications are available.

One respondent who aspired to headship and was confident to take on this position said he had benefited from county training, but pointed out increasing issues with training opportunities:

“For three years county provided training for aspiring heads has been cancelled due to lack of numbers (as MATs do their own in house). NPQH is inconsistent and lots of senior staff have it from the days when it was considered good INSET rather than for people 18 months from headship.”

Paul, Norfolk

Chart 20: Qualification courses respondents would consider studying