Advanced Practitioners during COVID, Thriving or Surviving?

Research Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was commissioned by the Education and Training Foundation in March 2021 to explore how the COVID pandemic affected the ways in which Advanced Practitioners (APs) were working and, particularly, if they were '*thriving or surviving*'. The research was underpinned by three research questions:

1. What is helping APs to thrive during the pandemic and support the practice of others?

2. How are APs sharpening their own digital practice so they can support the (digital) practice of others?

3. How have APs been operating during the pandemic?

Data and information were collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods, then coded and analysed. The team outlined the research, including provisional responses to the research questions at an FE ResearchMeet on 21 May. Some of the materials used at this event are incorporated in this report.

The report includes narratives related to each of the three research questions. APs welcomed their engagement with both formal and informal activities and dialogue within their own organisation and teams. External encounters continued to be also highly valued during the pandemic in reducing isolation and providing the spaces to discuss successes, support wellbeing and share coping strategies.

Findings relevant to the second research question related to the speed at which APs had to change and find new ways to support others. Face-to-face engagements were still seen as important but digital engagements quickly dominated. A dualism emerged where the growing expertise of APs in the use of digital platforms for collaboration was coupled with an increased appreciation of key elements underpinning digital pedagogies.

The data relating to research question 3: how APs were operating during the pandemic, allowed us to adopt an overarching perspective defined through six themes: **sense of purpose**, **diverse constituencies**, **technology**, **architecture**, **values** and **meaning**.

A complex picture arose from the research. The AP role is a wide ranging one and the pandemic presented different challenges for them and their organisations. Nevertheless, the importance of three conditions emerged and, to maximise the potential for APs to thrive during the pandemic, all needed to be in place. The conditions included **strong communities of practice for both social and professional purposes**, and **organisational cultures colonised by shared values that fostered self-efficacy during difficult times**. The third condition: **virtual architecture** revealed the

importance of deliberately curated virtual spaces in supporting APs during the pandemic.

In the conclusion of the report, we try to paint a clear picture of what must not be left behind as APs and the wider sector emerge from the pandemic. We recommend exploring and taking forward the following learning in the post-pandemic AP Further Education context:

Pan organisational communities strengthened collaboration and reduced isolation during the pandemic

- How can we continue fostering pan-organisational communities going forward?

Deliberately curated virtual spaces were important in fostering a sense of care and professional dialogue between APs

- How can we continue to deliberately curate virtual spaces to foster a sense of care and professional dialogue between APs?

The positive resolution of tensions/dualities between different spaces that APs inhabit was important in securing their identity and purpose.

- How can we continue to facilitate the positive resolution of tensions/dualities between different spaces that APs inhabit?

In many instances supportive organisational cultures were strengthened during the pandemic. This was not a given and required significant investment by those supporting APs.

- How can we continue building and investing in supportive organisational cultures?

Trust emerged as a critical value for APs to thrive during the pandemic.

- How do we intentionally cultivate trust?

The use of 'we' in the above sentences encompasses government, policy, professional development bodies such as the ETF, governors, leaders and APs themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

METHODOLOGY

An online survey was designed and shared through a wide range of social media. 133 responses were received over three weeks. The 30 questions were a mixture of open and closed design and explored the demographics of the respondents, the nature of their role, the type of professional development and resources they had accessed and its impact. Open ended responses were invited under themes of **collaboration, support, virtual and digital practices** including enablers and barriers.

Further material was collected through online 'spotlights'. These were discussions facilitated by two of the research team with small groups of advanced practitioners and their colleagues from 5 further education providers including community learning, offender learning and further education college settings. A small amount of funding was available to facilitate participation in the spotlights.

The 90-minute group spotlight interviews were framed using Thinking Environment principles[1], audio recorded and transcribed. The expertise of one of the research team members, as a Google innovator (one of 78 internationally in 2020), underpinned the fieldwork process. The areas for consideration emerged from the survey responses and also drew on the learning from the third round of APConnect that had recently concluded at the time of the research. The idea of 'Nogobackery[2]' was explored in the context of the Kubler-Ross model for organisational change.

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[1] Mycroft, L. Sidebottom, K. (2020) AP Guide: Creating Spaces to Think in Further Education and Training (Thinking Environment). ETF. available at https://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/OTLA-AP-guide-CreatingSpaces-_Feb_2020.pdf [accessed 15.7.2021.
[2] Term coined by AP Jennifer Thetford-Kay during the pandemic

Figure 1: Spotlight Interviews
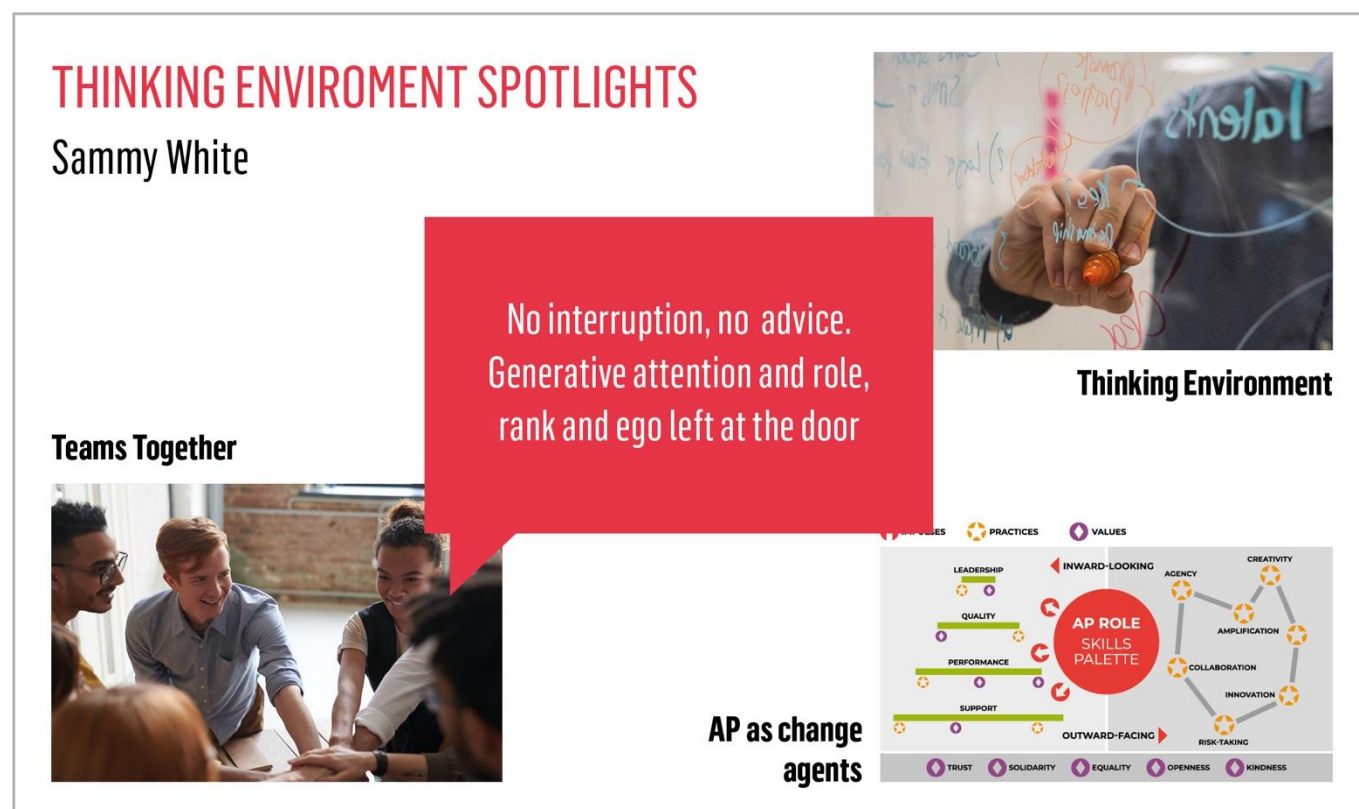
The research team wanted to prioritise methods and collection of data and information that gave careful ethical consideration to the participants and their organisations. The team was aware that a degree of risk to the participants was linked to the situated nature of the research and remedies to mitigate risk needed to be in place through the process. Survey responses were anonymous and the organisations participating in the spotlights remained confidential. The survey questions were shared with the commissioning organisation and modifications made before the tool was launched. Members of the newly formed Research Colleges Group reviewed the methodology from an ethical perspective.

The methodology centred on an ethics of care[3], and, as such, the research was not constrained by a researcher generated theoretical framework. The team prioritised recognising, adopting, and responding to the perspectives of participants rather than applying their own judgements.

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[3] Bergmark, U (2020) Rethinking researcher–teacher roles and relationships in educational action research through the use of Nel Noddings' ethics of care. EDUCATIONAL ACTION RESEARCH 2020, VOL. 28, NO. 3, 331–344

Figure 2: Ethics of Care

ANALYSIS

The data from the closed survey questions were analysed using tools available through the SurveyMonkey platform. The responses to the open-ended survey questions and transcriptions from the spotlights were coded using Dedoose[4] software. Examples of the categories that resulted are shown in figure 3 below.

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[4] https://www.dedoose.com/

Figure 3: Coding Categories and examples

Community	Connection	
	Engagement	
	Sharing Knowledge	
	Wider Communities	
Digital Progress		
Examples of Change		
Programmes	JoyFE	
	AP Connect	AP Connect
		Constellations
		Equality Mentoring
		Festival Fridays
		Ideas Room
		Slack
	ETF	PDGs
	ED Tech Mentoring	
	Google	
	Teams	
	Prof Learning	
	Teach Meets	
	TE	
	Twitter	
	Zoom	
Room for Growth	Blended Learning	
	Growth with Tech	
	Resources	
Skills Learnt		
Workplace	Embracing	
	Restricting	

The analytical approach drew on the ethnographic and anthropological backgrounds of members of the team (Mycroft, F. 2020[5]) and aligned with the research team being insiders to, and embedded with, the ETF's APConnect programme. Contributions from the research became the Bowerbird's 'Shiny Blue Things' (Mycroft, L. 2021[6]) highlighted in Figure 4 below. In this context Lou Mycroft positions the Bowerbird in her own research as follows:

> *'in the real world, the blue satin Bowerbird finds his mate in South Australia by creating a gorgeous bower at mating time, not to live in, just for fancy, and he decorates it with all the blue shiny things he can find – the detritus of human life such as straws and bottle tops. I used his bird's eye view to pick out all the 'blue shiny things' of the research material in this initial cut, the visions for community education of all those 400 participants who, by the way, didn't seem to have the same problems as me with making the visible, invisible. The question had worked! The ideas were magnificent.'*

Figure 4: Approach to Analysis

AN APPROACH TO ANALYSIS
Fraser Mycroft

The Bowerbird's Blue Shiny Things

Using tech to help process material, but it's still a very human process. Why don't we talk about it more?

Processing Material

Anthropological Skills

RQ 1 WHAT IS HELPING APs TO THRIVE DURING THE PANDEMIC AND SUPPORT THE PRACTICE OF OTHERS?

The seven questions in section 5 'Professional Learning' of the survey asked respondents to reflect on influences on their role as APs and how they support others. As such, the data are helpful in informing RQ1. There is also much of relevance to the other two RQs.

Little difference in weightings were noted from responses from APs with different levels of experience or from different organisation types. The data below therefore refer to an analysis of all responses.

The table below gives the highest ranked aspects across all the 7 questions (weighted average of responses: 1=low, 5 = high impact[7])

Questions	Response
Informal chats/meetings with other APs	4.5
Meeting with your own team	4.3
AP-led events (e.g. #APNorth, #APSouth)	4.2
Ideas Rooms (e.g. APConnect maths/English Ideas Rooms)	4.1
'How to' training session/CPD (e.g. learning about a new platform, app, or intervention)	4.1
Events organised by grassroots #FE (e.g. #FEResearchMeet)	4.1
Informal chats/meetings with people outside FE	4.1
Reading relevant texts	4.1
Wider reading - not just about FE (e.g. Brené Brown)	4.0

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[7] The Survey Monkey platform calculates a weighted average between the Likert Scale responses. It is these data that are included in the tables here. Some analysts question the validity of averaging of ordinal categories, mainly because the assumption is made the increment between each point on the scale is assumed to be equal. See here, for example https://www.theanalysisfactor.com/ways-analyze-ordinal-variables/

There were no low scores to any of the questions with the lowest impacts (weighted averages) being reported from:

- Newsletters and mailouts (e.g. ETF, AoC, SET)   3.3

- Teacher Radio (e.g. Teacher Hug Radio)   3.3

The highest impact from internally facing activities is an interesting finding. What is not clear from this section is the extent to which APs were given confidence to engage in such activities, or how the activities were informed by other aspects. Data from other parts of the survey, for example, responses to Q25 (*how are you passing on what you have learnt in your AP role?*), together with the spotlights will be particularly useful in exploring this insider/outsider engagement.

Responses to each question are outlined below. A 'relevance %[8]' is included. This is derived from the numbers of participants that saw specific aspects as 'not applicable.'

Training and Courses	Weighted Impact	Relevance %
'How to' training session/CPD (e.g. learning about a new platform, app, or intervention)	4.1	95
Involvement in other training programmes (e.g. OTLA, ETF Middle Managers Programme)	3.9	65
Online course (e.g. FutureLearn)	3.9	75
Webinars (e.g. ETF Webinar Series)	3.7	87
Academic Study (e.g. SUNCETT programme)	3.6	39
'Catch-up' event or webinar (e.g. watched/listened to after the event)	3.5	83

In 'other' options, ETF featured three times (twice in the context of the mentoring programme); 'developmental observations' mentioned once (but it's not clear if this refers to the APConnect Module specifically); one reference to each of AoC PDG, FutureLearn, in-house leadership programme, Thinking Environment and 'I got a lot from my one-to-one with Lou'. There was also a reference to 'Trailblazers'. This potentially refers to training relating to apprenticeship delivery.

Events and Conferences	Weighted Impact	Relevance %
AP-led events (e.g. #APNorth, #APSouth)	4.2	34
Events organised by grassroots #FE (e.g. #FEResearchMeet)	4.1	44
Events which are not AP-led (e.g. AoC Conference, SET Conference)	3.7	33

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[8] This value has been calculated outside the Survey Monkey platform by subtracting the percentage of respondents who indicated that the category was 'not applicable' from 1.

Far more respondents saw 'events and conferences' as not applicable, compared to 'training and courses'. Other responses included:

- LSRN/FEResearchMeet

- World Skills

- The Hearts and Minds festivals have been incredibly inspiring

- Awarding body managed events

- JoyFE Ideas Rooms, digital training, and personal training sessions

Social Media	Weighted Impact	Relevance %
Hashtag communities (e.g. #JoyFE ♡ #LoveESOL)	3.9	73
Live Twitter events (e.g. #ukfechat)	3.8	73
Other social media opportunity	3.6	62

Other responses included:

- ESOL pedagogy group on Facebook: good source of ideas that I then disseminate

- Facebook live (this relates to Lou Mycroft's daily JoyFE broadcast)

- LinkedIn (x2)

- Global GEG Google education group

Two respondents reflected that they did not use social media.

Online Communities	Weighted Impact	Relevance %
Meeting with your own team	4.3	98
Ideas Rooms (e.g. APConnect maths/English Ideas Rooms)	4.1	59
#APConnect Slack	3.8	61
Virtual 'Staffrooms' (e.g. the C-Learning Virtual Staffroom)	3.7	64
Other platform-based communities (e.g. Facebook, Slack)	3.7	73

JoyFE was mentioned specifically by one respondent and another highlighted 'Tea Room at ACL Essex'.

Publications and Readings	Weighted Impact	Relevance %
Wider reading - not just about FE (e.g. Brené Brown)	4.0	93
Research articles/ case studies (e.g. via Excellence Gateway)	4.0	85
Reading blogs from FE practitioners (e.g. other APs' blogs)	3.9	90
Professional Journals (e.g. TES, InTuition)	3.8	90

	Weighted Impact	Relevance %
Peer reviewed papers (e.g. by organisational subscription)	3.8	81
Newsletters and mailouts (e.g. ETF, AoC, SET)	3.5	55
Wider reading - not just about FE (e.g. Brené Brown)	3.3	84

One respondent noted UCU as a source of publications and readings and another reflected that they read a lot of subject specific works.

Broadcasting	Weighted Impact	Relevance %
Listening to AP-produced podcasts	3.8	26
Listening to podcasts more generally (e.g. FEResearch Podcast)	3.8	25
Teacher Radio (e.g. Teacher Hug Radio)	3.3	55

Other comments included

- Mr Barton podcasts are amazing!

- College CPD - In house or external facilitator

- College collaboration project on Digital and Blended Learning

Broadcasting	Weighted Impact	Relevance %
Informal chats/meetings with other APs	4.5	99
Informal chats/meetings with people outside FE	4.1	93
Other	3.9	18

Comments included

- Practice Development Groups using Action Learning Sets method

- peer coaching arranged with members of the ETF new to mentoring course, outside of course hours

- NATECLA events and tweets

- College collaboration project

Further insights into thriving and supporting

The open-ended responses to the survey questions and responses from the spotlights reveal that **connection** was central to supporting APs to prosper during the pandemic. Participants in the research expressed this through the enhancement of their 'joy and energy' and the benefits of **engaging** in virtual relationships that fostered mutual support. Such support was wide ranging and embraced a diversity of areas, including: inspiration, motivation, reduced isolation, advice, sharing successes, and dealing with struggles. Two responses included:

'A huge part, without our communities of practice and online spaces to talk teachers and TAs would have felt isolated'.

'But, reflecting now, how far we have travelled, all of us and where we are now and what we can do. It's just, it just feels so powerful and so empowering and still exciting'.

Other **impacts and benefits** reported by participants included growth in confidence and competence for themselves both as individuals and in wider relationships. This was expressed by two APs through their changing expectations:

'To be agile, not to expect that everyone is going to feel the same, to explore and be curious and not be afraid to try something new'.

'That's my feeling and that's how I'm going to work and I've really learned to kind of lean less but lean more on myself, kind of just power on and do it, which is a personal thriving for me to be honest, rather than being needier and also being there for staff in different contexts, behind the screen as a person has been crucial to kind of understand how I can help and assist myself and others'.

The interplay between connection and engagement was expressed through participants highlighting the significance of **community** and **collaboration** in helping them to thrive. The importance of the **#APConnect** programme and the **Constellations** associated with it in providing the architecture that allowed APs to thrive was highlighted by the research participants.

"It's been extremely valuable to be part of the AP project and community over time to be able to develop ourselves, others and organisation, to change culture and continue to make improvements"

'To understand the power of collaboration and taking small steps, not being defeated by some of the bigger obstacles.

'AP Connect and all the opportunities it has provided to network, share ideas, ask questions, learn from each other and gain confidence to take back to my organisation'

'The AP Connect programme is really well promoted and organised. It would have been very easy to take a back seat this year but the perseverance of the team has led to truly wonderful collaboration and hope across the sector'

'AP Connect is an amazing network and a gift to those lucky enough to be able to join in. I genuinely credit AP Connect and specifically Lou Mycroft for changing my life, making me a more confident and resilient person'

'a learning community such as the AP programme is invaluable. There is a greater amount of sharing, listening, support from people outside of my organisation than inside my organisation. I see the AP network as my work community. They provide a sounding board for my ideas'

Many of the research participants reported that their **organisational cultures** were fruitful settings for fostering the dynamics described above that developed in AP communities.

'I am continually encouraged by my managers and my team as we work together on collaborative projects (creating/delivering CPD and supporting teaching colleagues with TLA) and during our regular Teams meetings. My manager is great at tailoring projects that match my skill-set or that will challenge me to learn and develop new skills - this is very motivating. I think that I encourage others with my 'we can achieve anything' attitude and I put this into practice when working collaboratively with my team / coaching teachers'.

'I feel very supported by our small team of AP practitioners in our organisation, which has developed over the past year. Feel encouraged today to identify new ways of encouraging further collaboration with non AP staff. I feel I incorporate an encouraging and collaborative practice and approach in my work'

'I am encouraging collaboration as part of my project, I will be including ALS to discuss issues and developmental points. In addition, to this my organisation is encouraging teams to work collaboratively together to develop training sessions.'

As illustrated above many participants expressed the value of engagement and connection leading to collaboration in general terms. However, a strong sense of context also emerges from the responses which was commonly voiced through the communities being seen as vehicles for **knowledge sharing,** for example as two APs expressed:

'I accessed the perspectives of more experienced colleagues'.

'I need to amplify what could be useful to them so, you know, little nuggets that are of their week that could really make a difference to their week'.

The notion of sharing 'best practice' was seen as important here, where responses often linked to developing digital expertise, the focus of the second research question where this aspect is explored further.

Many responses implied that the virtual communities fostered the core purpose of APs in enhancing teaching and learning practices in their organisations, notably when supporting colleagues in the transition from virtual to face-face or blended delivery. One participant provided a reminder that it was important to prioritise **'pedagogy over technology'**. Other responses included:

> *'Engaging others via teams, offering 1-1 type clinic sessions, sharing of relevant information/techniques explored from my own CPD opportunities"*
>
> *'I feel like it what I've done in my projects I've learned so much and I'm absolutely just bursting to bring it back with me to our team, and I'm already sort of talking to my team and the management as well about how I can use this when I come back'.*
>
> *'setting up learning spaces for staff in which they can share practice and ask questions e.g. teachmeets, PDGs'*
>
> *'My best learning experience has been the thinking environment bootcamps where I have learned how to facilitate and this has changed my practice. This has been recognised in a recent observation and am now hoping to get more colleagues on board with this'*
>
> *'Tutor and LSA Tea Room in my organisation, with weekly drop-ins, short digital skills training sessions and offering further mentoring or training from there. Encouraging by being part of curriculum teams on MS Teams'*

References to the AP Connect programme occurred most frequently in the responses. Other programmes were also mentioned. These included the ETF's mentoring programme and associated communities of practice, and the positioning of Action Learning Sets within Practice Development Groups.

Constraints on APs' activities included the difficulties of finding suitable times for key colleagues to meet virtually. AP activities were also sometimes seen as additional to the working day, bringing additional pressures on those participating.

Some respondents noted that many colleagues had struggled to come to grips with remote working. Professional and personal tensions (e.g. between work and home schooling, and competition for bandwidth) were also often seen as barriers: '*Difficulty juggling multiple roles and motherhood!'* .Another participant highlighted other, organisational, tensions:

> *'Yeah, my thinking is about sometimes experiencing feeling almost that, you know, daily dichotomy that because of my role, where it's, you know, having the constraints, having the straitjacket sometimes and policies and procedures that are, you know, very very restricting, but then also having that freedom and that breath of fresh air from the advanced practitioners'.*

The cost of working virtually on APs' **health and wellbeing** was highlighted for example: '*Sometimes just being so tired. Lots of the stuff is late at night and I am just too tired for this*

and my head is so full I want to put it down'. Concerns did not always refer to APs' own situation. The wellbeing of both teachers and learners as well as APs themselves also featured, for example:

> *'So it's almost like you know emotionally checking on others, sort of making sure that they're okay and then we can talk about work. So this has maybe brought up the well-being more to the front than it has ever been before, when we were physically passing each other at the loos or in the kitchen or wherever. So, yeah, definitely a positive one'.*
>
> *'And I'm quite good at, you know, coping and compartmentalising but it was a massive emotional toll on me to help the learners because sometimes the days that we're teaching they were the only people that, you know, some of them were living on their own, and we were the only people, they saw, and they just wanted to offload'.*
>
> *'I had this sort of like insight into teachers lives where I was there in their home with them, seeing them on their own saying, 'I'm drowning, I'm struggling. I don't know what I'm doing'.*

Face-face interactions were sometimes seen to represent higher quality engagements between colleagues. The virtual context appeared to create a sense of 'always on' for one participant:

> *'I just want to make sure that, am I going to be needed? You know, because there's this massive fear and everything's got to change quickly if there's someone that can help'.*

Some participants reported significant dissonance between their development in external AP communities and the **culture of their organisation**. Such frustrations are captured in these two comments:

> *"I think there is a distinct wall between my team, colleagues and the SMT. It feels that SMT are not all encouraging of innovative practices and approaches and hierarchy is enforced at all time, leaving me feeling disempowered by lack of support and encouragement by the SMT in general. It is obviously my choice to work for the organisation and I very much enjoy my job but it feels there are a lot of vulnerabilities at the top of the chain and a lack of open minded thinking and shared vision.*
>
> *external pressures and priorities of the day job; senior managers not being openly encouraging and appreciative'*

RQ2 HOW ARE APs SHARPENING THEIR OWN DIGITAL PRACTICE SO THEY CAN SUPPORT THE (DIGITAL) PRACTICE OF OTHERS.

Many respondents to the survey and participants in the spotlights reflected the need to rapidly engage with a **steep learning curve** to enhance their own digital practice. The disruptive nature of the pandemic was seen as often enforcing **rapid change**.

> *'it has all been a big learning curve and just being able to use the basic functions of Zoom and Teams has been an achievement. I feel like I'm just at the beginning of my digital journey and one which continues to flourish even when face-to-face meeting is allowed. I*

feel excited about the digital possibilities and even attending events like this with the use of the flipgrid, mentimeter etc have been an eye opener'.

'I was well into it even before but have since explored more digital teaching tools and have delivered training on digital design, which has in turn helped me research and learn even more digital lesson delivery, how it differs from face to face, what tools can do the job of certain elements we use in teaching face to face, etc'.

'I went from knowing very little to being a fully trained and effective online teacher in 12 months'.

'I have learned more about digital design and teaching More than I have within the past 20 years of teaching'.

I hope I've got over some of my I.T. phobia. And I hope it's made me think differently about how I teach.

One participant drew on a particularly powerful analogy:

'Unprecedented situation that's made us a bit like the war, go out there and do it, instead of being a bit ponderous about it we haven't had the opportunity. And I suppose in a way my concern is, I was discussing this with my son who's also delivering virtually, but we don't want to be like war wives who get taken back out of the factory and shoved back in our front rooms with our kids, at all, obviously'.

One participant felt that some caution was necessary relating to expectations and the speed of change:

'How varied it can and needs to be. How it can work for all curriculum areas. How it can be time consuming but must be viewed differently when planning. How it doesn't happen overnight!''

A distinction emerged between using digital platforms for **communication** and for enhancing teaching and learning. Some participants highlighted the importance of engagement with a variety of digital platforms, for example:

'How to use multiple platforms and to adapt with changing technologies'

'To be agile, not to expect that everyone is going to feel the same, to explore and be curious and not be afraid to try something new'.

'I have learnt about effective pedagogy, research, apps such as Padlet, Wakelet, Nearpod and also differentiated delivery models'.

Other respondents that their practice was heightened through the need for simplification.

'Stripping back content has given more opportunities to carry out thorough guided practice and greater fluency as a result. Keeping to a few core apps to model, collaborate and assess learners has worked'.

'Basic pedagogy first consideration, use small number tools well, be mindful of learners' access to tech, make sure break time and collaboration is built in'

'Keep it simple and embrace. Don't be afraid to try stuff out'.

'Many staff still aren't comfortable with it in my area of work. Keep things simple! Pedagogy is the driver, not the tech'

The importance of understanding how digital practices **engage and empower learners** was often a key priority for participants in the research. In this context, comparisons were occasionally made with face-face delivery.

'I've learned a whole new, exciting way of delivering TL&A using Teams software and digital tools. The pedagogy underpinning the design and delivery of remote teaching has helped me to support and communicate by demonstrating good practice'

'That good TLA is good TLA, and technology can allow a wide audience to access and engage with learning, but that it doesn't replace face-to-face sessions, but can be great to support or run alongside live and/or remote learning'

'It has also been an achievement to support learners in how to access the digital resources and feel confident about switching cameras on'

'Training sessions are great, but unless we know how a particular app or function fits into the whole picture - the lesson and what learners will gain from it - it can be very confusing'.

'How to use teams for delivering in an interactive way to keep students engaged and focused while still learning in preparation for exams'.

Within the survey, participants were asked: ***How have you learned about digital design and teaching*** *since March 2020?* Multiple responses were possible to the following options:

- Watching something

- Talking with others in a 'normal' type of conversation

- Observing someone's practice

- Reading something

- Being formally taught by someone

- Listening to something

- Thinking with others in a Thinking Environment

- Working on a co-produced project

The chart below shows the proportion of responses to these prompts.
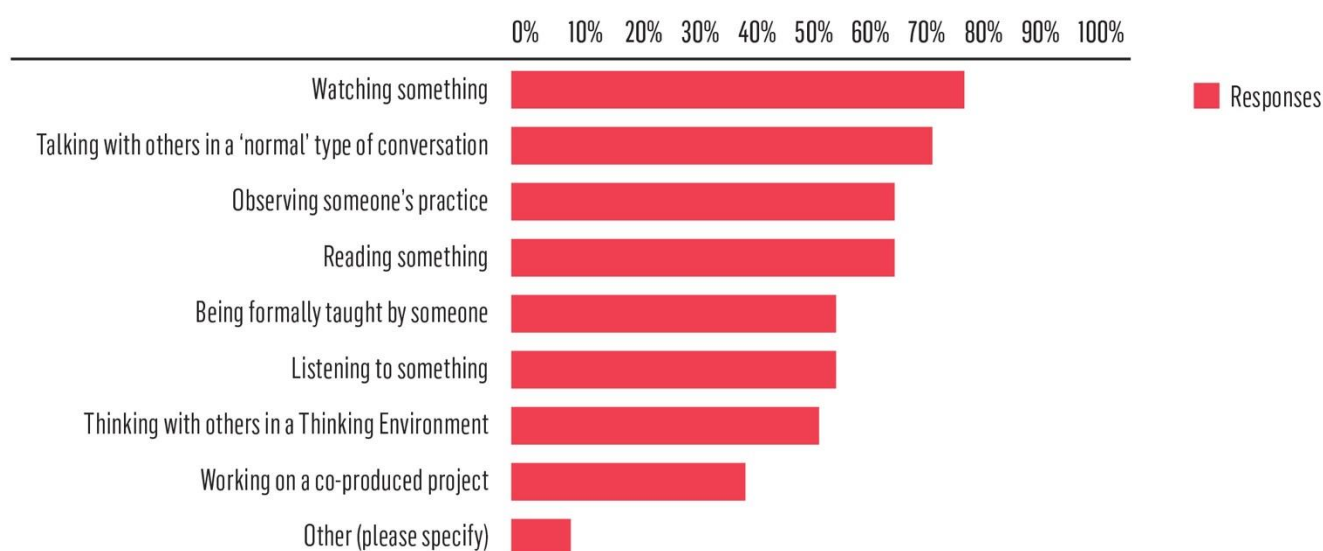
One participant highlighted the ETF's **Digital Teaching Professional Framework** in informing their digital practice. **Research and experimentation** were also important.

'The main way I've learned is through experimenting with tools and different ways to teach. Listening to feedback from learners and observing how they respond to different activities. Googling to find tools that address my needs and those of my students'.

'I used to be interested in e-learning for my Master's thesis and I explored the online teaching solution independently, I supplemented that with independent research and video demonstrations of other practitioners' delivery'.

'Attended staff development and own research'.

'Take own initiatives to research and spend time on practising them'.

'Doing it'.

'Having the time and support to finish my MA, which has led me into new roles and possibilities in my future, as well as the ability to discuss my work in a more interactive and thorough way. I think this has also motivated me to 'rethink' my teaching practice, and work to be a better me!'

'And for me it's more cyclical because I'm back experimenting again now with what we can do so it's not so much a curve as it is a cyclical model.

'I can't believe how much stuff I've learned and really experimenting in CPD and understanding that I know that I can go anywhere to learn things now and everybody's offering stuff that you can learn and I'm involved in offering stuff that you can learn and I never would have done that before'.

Also, within the survey, participants were asked **How are you passing on what you have learned in your AP-type role since March 2020?** Multiple responses where possible from the following options.

- In conversation, WhatsApp or other informal interactions

- In a coaching or mentoring relationship

- Taking it to team meetings

- By organising staff training

- By producing new resources (e.g. podcasts, webpages, videos)

- By curating existing resources (e.g. onto a Wakelet)

- Using your influence to build allies in the organisation

- Using your influence to build allies across the sector

- Intentionally, on social media

As previously, respondents valued most highly the importance of **team interaction** in disseminating digital practice. Such coaching and mentoring activities are at the heart of their roles as APs. A particularly powerful illustration was provided by one participant.

> *'Setting up an online tea room with weekly drop-ins. Sharing what I have learnt to do, by making screen recordings, or commenting on threads in the tea room and curriculum Teams. In mentoring relationships, by teaching and encouraging digital skills and practice.'*

In the context of gaining allies, one participant highlighted the importance of aligning financial support with digital developments.

> *'gaining and maintaining support for the AP team using the CPD budget to continue with staff training and peer support/paired collaboration; further development and diversification of service digital offer for adult learning'*

Seeking supporters for change within respondents' organisations is seen as more important than allies from the wider sector. Although lower ranking in the survey, resources and their curation are still valued by a quarter to a third of respondents.

From the spotlights in particular, insights into how APs' own digital practice enhanced the work of teams emerged strongly: for example:

> *'the significant in fact, anything that is team-driven and not fully autonomous is best (when it is just about me I tend to absorb 'what I think is relevant' and in teams I tend to hear other perspectives that are valid!)'*

> *'And with working remotely, you have to have patience, if somebody doesn't see you, your teams chat or your email, and you have to wait for their working pattern, which... and we know that working patterns have changed, there's a lot more flexibility in those now'.*

However digital practice was also important in enhancing team working between APs themselves:

> *'And we also talked about how it's important for the AP team to support one another. So we can share that enthusiasm, energy, support each other when things are a bit low and pick ourselves up, and then you know present a different face to the rest of the world. And that's because you know we have that respect, we have better equality, we have an appreciation for each other, and we share the values, and it's about trust and openness and communication',*
>
> *'I launched into work started doing all this new online delivery loved it actually even though it was the most scary thing. But it was new and I quite like something new and found out that you can still communicate with people'.*

These responses also give insights into how APs have influenced **change in the management or leadership of digital design/teaching practice within their organisations.** Many of these relate to **reshaping CPD,** including **asynchronous availability.**

> *'Designed and delivering online training to tutors and staff for blended learning'*
>
> *'Introduced more (opportunities) so teachers have options'*
>
> *'Designed a workshop on pedagogy for online learning'*
>
> *'Via my quality project looking for an effective assessment online tool for family learning, I discovered Nearpod and have provided training and coaching to support tutors teaching online'.*
>
> *'I am providing TechEd training and supporting tutors with the specific TechEd app I am facilitating'.*
>
> *'Delivery of CPD - staff talking ownership and delivering and designing based on their feedback. Also implementing flipped strategies so that staff can access CPD anytime'.*
>
> *'Delivering staff development about how we can keep the good bits of lockdown and blended learning''*
>
> *One participant celebrated the impact of such changes on their own team but also their organisation:*
>
> *'And at the very beginning, it was very much about survive as it was for everybody else. And the sort of decisions that we had to make, and the processes, and the learning and the things we had to put in place just to survive. And I feel like we've all done really well as a team and as an organisation to sort of level that out and get to a place now where it's working'.*
>
> *Another participant highlighted the differences made within all layers within their organisation:*

> *'We have made a change, our students have gained, our colleagues have gained, we have changed gear and culture'*

Many examples emerged of changes in digital practice to provide professional development in specific teaching and learning techniques. Also, returning to the context of **supporting learners:**

> *''We also have created a learning package to support learners with learning to learn online*
>
> *'Implementation of the use of 'Mote' in giving verbal feedback to students via digital teaching and how this helps to support students understanding. We have now purchased full versions of this and used this in training to support student and the improvements of their work'.*
>
> *'And I think and I grow to, it's that embarrassing silence, you have to fill isn't it when you, you've asked two questions and then oh my god they've taken a millisecond to answer I'll jump in and tell them, or encourage them. So I think sometimes a delay on teams has helped with that, that the silence, I don't want to say it becomes uncomfortable for learners but leave it for a while, bite your tongue and then the learners will fill that space themselves and think... think things through and they took their roles within that group'.*
>
> *'They adopted their own roles, without anybody hogging it. And I felt as well they really grew with etiquette, can I say?'*

Other impacts relate to creating digital architectures for **sharing practice** within organisations.

'Setting up Best Practice Teams on TEAMS and using them in standardisation and mentoring sessions'.

> *'Introduction of a shared online space including opportunity to meet and discuss practice across the college'.*
>
> *I have created a dashboard of the organisation on ETF's digital platform and 6 members of staff are working through it, a member of staff submitted a grant proposal for digital reflections on my suggestion'*
>
> *'Collaborating on Slack through AP Connect, through ETF new to mentoring course, informally with anyone met through training or events via Zoom, Teams or Whatsapp. Being encouraged particularly by JoyFE groups such as Slack, Whatsapp and Twitter. Being offered free or very reasonable sessions on digital, subject, creative or personal skills. Making contacts at events, following on Twitter and knowing our areas of interest, we can encourage and help each other'.*

One respondent highlighted their influence in developing a **digital strategy** for their organisation and another highlighted the need for a strong rationale for change:

> *Don't just pick a technology and expect everyone to just deal with it. Change what you use and how you use it'.*

Such strategic influences may extend beyond an AP's own organisation:

> *'I have also worked on the Ed Tech Demonstrator programme this year - my feedback on what has/has not worked when delivering 'remote learning' CPD to external colleges/schools has influenced the content and style of our packages'.*

Other ways of securing **management buy in for change,** including evidence-based approaches, included:

> *'I have suggested and implemented some online activities to support our participants, which I have been able to gain management approval. I have introduced the creation of small films to evidence our work, which again I have been able to gain my managers approval to do this'.*

> *'Sharing teacher voice feedback to inform strategy'*

> *'Influenced SLT to take part in a Vision for Change Workshop'*

> *'Through delivery of feedback to the senior IT team, providing suggestions for improvements and additional functionality aspects that would support teaching staff in the digital delivery aspect of their work'.*

> *'Raising awareness of the day to day difficulties of teaching online with governors'.*

At the organisational level several respondents reported changes in **quality assurance and improvement processes**, particularly virtual approaches to lesson observations.

> *'Formal observations not taking place as too much stress for staff'*

> *'The pilot of unseen (observations) about to be launched and a coaching process - driven switch from the product focussed model we currently use for quality assurance'.*

> *'a stop to online learning walks for quality assurance!'*

> *'Peer observations! No more deficit model'*

> *'Asking to pilot new paperwork formats (which diverge from traditional managerial directives, but with the intention of improvement!)'*

> *'I've managed to convince my own manager for me to try something new rather than the same old "training style" method. I take initiatives and also demonstrate/model the use of technology and pedagogy behind it as much as I can'.*

RQ 3 HOW HAVE APs BEEN OPERATING DURING THE PANDEMIC?

APs have been working in a huge variety of ways during the pandemic. In one sense this is grounded in the 'business as usual' framing of AP roles and the expectations placed upon APs by others. The survey responses revealed 49 different descriptors covering the role. These included coaching and mentoring, learning development, quality assurance and improvement, IQA and teacher education. Several also reflected management dimensions to the role.

Figure 5: Image of 49 descriptors used by respondents to describe the AP role

It appears that APs maintained, and even enhanced, the reach of the role during the pandemic. Many APs have a cross organisational remit and not spending time travelling between campuses was productive, however new and increased pressures emerged for APs during the pandemic. Many of these issues have been explored in detail in narrative under RQ1 and RQ2.

The discussion below attempts to draw out the headlines that capture how APs have been operating in the pandemic.

Themes

The areas below centre on how communities and collaboration have shaped AP activities during the pandemic. The six themes are *sense of purpose, diverse constituencies, technology, architecture, values* and *meaning.*

Communities were central to how APs operated during the pandemic and, critically, a strong **sense of purpose** for these collaborative endeavours emerged. In, summary, the following arose from the participants as being important.

- Mutual support to increase confidence and self-efficacy

- Recognising tensions within organisations, e.g. between AP and senior leaders and strategies for reconciling

- Ideas to support practice relating to digital platforms and their applications, specific teaching and learning contexts, and means of supporting learners virtually

- The creation of safe spaces outside APs' organisations leading to shared problem solving and experimentation.

- Sharing research findings and other resources

One participant highlighted the communities as being important '*to understand the power of collaboration and taking small steps, not being defeated by some of the bigger obstacles'.*

Another AP also reflected on the idea of a journey:

'I think in the beginning, possibly more survive because there was so much to adjust to and learn and discover and that was quite a journey and I had to be quite brave about it, I think'

The focus of communities on the collective work of APs specifically also emerged:

'(in response to: What don't you want to lose from this year's digital experimentation?) momentum and appreciation for the role that APs play in the service'

'thriving when able to focus on the AP role and getting a lot of inspiration and satisfaction; surviving when struggling with the demands of the day job/other people's priorities and organisation priorities, dealing with time constraints and budget cutbacks'

The communities were built on **diverse constituencies.** Attention has been drawn to the wide range of role descriptors that apply to the AP landscape. Participants came from different types of organisations in a range of geographical settings, and also had different levels of teaching experience and understanding of what it means to be an AP. Exposure to wide ranging perspectives had a significant influence on how APs operated during the pandemic. The structures they engaged with were highly democratic in nature enhancing the potential for diverse voices to be expressed. The extensive use of Thinking Environment principles when APs were engaging with the communities was particularly important in ensuring equality of contribution.

A third influence on how APs operated was the **architecture** underpinning the communities they engaged with. Examples included: AP Connect Constellations, Ideas Rooms, Podcasts, Festival Fridays, Thinking Environment Bootcamps, Slack Platforms, Teach Meets and Action Learning Sets (particularly relating to the ETF Coaching and Mentoring and Provider Development Groups). All activity was virtual but the range of approaches, some in real time, others asynchronous, allowed engagement in one or more communities by the participants in the research.

Some communities explicitly fostered the use of Thinking Environments; however these principles also often underpinned the architecture of other communities. There is a sense from the participants' contributions that this approach was more important than having formal or structured facilitation for the communities. Nevertheless, the role of 'gurus' in creating and supporting community architecture was often highlighted. Notable examples included Joanne Miles in coaching and mentoring contexts and Lou Mycroft in a very wide range of situations including coaching and also facilitating thinking environment sessions.

Linked to the notion of community architecture the majority of participants naturally signposted the influence of **technology** on how they both engaged with communities and discharged their AP role within their own organisations during the pandemic. Both informal and formal mentoring was important in maximising APs' use of technology with the EdTech Mentor programme being signposted specifically.

Teams, Zoom, Slack, and the Google platform were all highlighted as were different types of social media. Growth in confidence, of APs and colleagues they were supporting, in using technology was a key element of how APs operated. Many participants indicated that the use of virtual technology should be an important part of the post pandemic AP world.

The fifth aspect that characterised how APs operated during the pandemic relates to **values**. Many participants reflected that the strong relationships they formed during the pandemic were values based. The research responses do not speak so much to consensus here, more the rise of a sense of solidarity between community members. This does not appear to have been deliberately fostered by the communities but emerged naturally from the relationships APs developed during the pandemic.

'I have learnt so much about deeper thinking - values and practices. The wider sector has given me the most amazing opportunities and I have achieved things I never thought possible'

'That we can do things a different way. That ideas are valid and we can be trusted'.

''(I have) a connection which I can then take back to my colleagues, this has given them encouragement and trust in being able to try new things'.

'I'm the only teaching and learning mentor in my organisation, so communities are essential to discuss ideas. Verbalising what I want to do, learn, try, create etc'

'Connections and inspirations from others; being part of the larger AP community; developing own competence and confidence in new skills and approaches when working online'

'So, overall, looking at the slide, I'm thinking, yeah, I've been, I've started with number one, and that was a big sort of deep overwhelming hole for me where I doubted myself and failed but, really, I just can't embrace it and maybe it's time to look at something else because I just can't cope with it, to really embracing it thriving, taking a lot of joy, enjoying it.'

'But bearing that in mind I think how we operate and the ethos that the APs bring and their attitudes and their skills and their values. This is what makes the difference and kind of recharging our batteries, by being together and having the support like what we're doing now. This is what helps us continue, really, and I would definitely want to hope that we are on the journey and we carry on and I wouldn't like to be without that.'

'we're approaching things with a much more... with more integrity and honesty'

'And I think it's about allowing yourself that freedom and knowing that you're trusted and that trust is a really important factor in this because I do feel that [RESPONDENT ONE] and my managers and my colleagues really, trust me, as a co worker. And I'm reliable to get things done. It's a big thing that actually, in this situation isn't it'?

'I am passionate about that side of things, you know, wanting to help people be able to do what they say they can't do, but they've got to help themselves at the end of the day and I'll never turn away helping support for me',

Participants indicated a considerable investment of time and energy in these digital journeys and a strong sense of **solidarity** with colleagues emerged from the responses.

'best learning experience in your AP role since March 2020 and people grow in confidence with digital economy'

'The development of staff that were very apprehensive when delivering remotely'

'The flexibility that teaching can happen remotely and we can still have quality T&L

'Teachers need time and a safe space when working with digital technologies'

An important dynamic here was how participants reported that they were affected by dissonance between their own **values-based practice** and that of organisational managers. This is illustrated below:

'(barriers include) external pressures and priorities of the day job; senior managers not being openly encouraging and appreciative'

'Not a strong culture of collaboration and research action'.

'In my workplace they don't have the culture of AP as such. We don't have others with the qualification'.

One participant raised the importance of APs in leadership contexts

'you have this idea of leadership but then I think, 'well wait a minute, who's the leader in this aren't we?''

However, some APs did highlight an increased synergy between organisational culture and values and their own development within AP communities. Examples include:

'my organisation is encouraging teams to work collaboratively together to develop training sessions'.

'Being encouraged by my wonderful manager, encouraging others by explaining tools etc in clear, friendly manner and supporting them until they are able to use with confidence'.

And I think it's about allowing yourself that freedom and knowing that you're

The final aspect that underpinned how APs operated during the pandemic is to do with **meaning.** APs clearly identified with both the 'surviving' and 'thriving' aspects of their role. These two features are not mutually exclusive and, during the pandemic, APs found themselves in both modes in difference spaces and contexts. One participant put their situation like this:

'I think I've been very fortunate in that I've almost been able to run with what I wanted to do and that's perhaps helped the thriving but also made the surviving quite difficult because there was nobody else to go back to'.

Connection with communities bought so much to APs during the pandemic. Precious areas for thinking and interacting surrounding APs they were given permission to focus on their own capacity building and that of others. APs became equipped with new approaches, enhanced their resilience, had their own judgements supported and developed confidence to experiment.

The research findings give tantalising insights into the emergence of much that reflects deeper and richer thinking. APs embraced opportunities to work in new ways and deconstruct and reconstruct their ways of working, influence, and impact. Three participants sum this dynamic up below:

> *'But I think we've just hit the tip of the iceberg and we're just, I think going forward. I can't see us going completely back I think that would be madness, but I think we can do a lot more'*
>
> *'And we know that the Christmas tree[9] will be there, even without the light so if we were all to be gone tomorrow it will still survive, but having these lights on and the force, that makes a difference and that makes things stand out'.*
>
> *'we're changing the culture and it's becoming so much more positive, and we do want to keep it that way'*

APs bought their own personal viewpoints to the communities they were part of. Sometimes these were based on instinct, at others time they were evidence-informed. APs were compelled to both reflect on their own thinking and draw on the ideas of others. Fresh perspectives and directions were opened up and new adventures launched. It is this emergence of collective sense making and increased confidence in where to go next that may be the most important feature to emerge from that complexity that underlies how APs have been operating during the pandemic.

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[9] 'Christmas Tree' here refers to the left-hand side of the model reproduced in figure 7 relating to constraints felt by APs in their organisations. They could put the 'lights on' the tree, however without flexibility within the architecture, the influence of the AP remained limited.
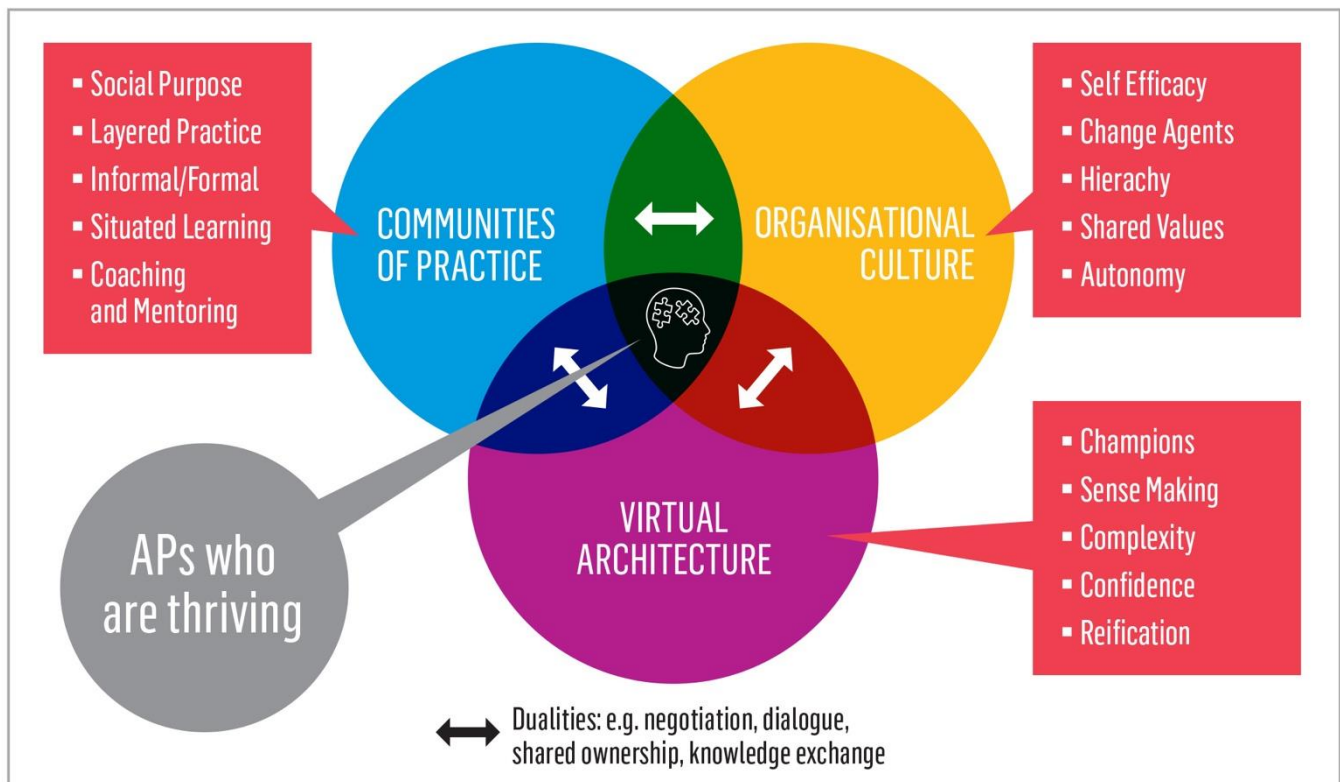
DISCUSSION

The information collected by the research and the discussions from the dissemination event suggest that several theoretical perspectives may be useful in framing the research findings. Three key areas have emerged from discussions between the research team and through engagement with delegates at the dissemination event. The conditions that **all** needed to be in play to ensure that APs thrived during the pandemic were:

- communities of practice that were far reaching and inclusive;

- organisational cultures that were supportive of APs in their complex and diverse roles; and

- access to and understanding of virtual architectures that facilitated cross organisational and collaborative practice.

This relationship is summarised in figure 6.

Figure 6: Conditions that influence APs Thriving or Surviving

- Social Purpose
- Layered Practice
- Informal/Formal
- Situated Learning
- Coaching and Mentoring

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

- Self Efficacy
- Change Agents
- Hierachy
- Shared Values
- Autonomy

APs who are thriving

VIRTUAL ARCHITECTURE

- Champions
- Sense Making
- Complexity
- Confidence
- Reification

Dualities: e.g. negotiation, dialogue, shared ownership, knowledge exchange

Characteristics of Communities of Practice

The influence of the pan-organisational constellations at the heart of the APConnect programme has been explored in the discussion under RQ1 above. It is clear from the research that these interactions replicated the richness of Communities of Practice, including the idea of apprenticeship, as originally conceived by Lave and Wenger (1991[10]) and explored further by Wenger (1998[11]). Although the AP role in further education settings is a highly diverse one, the descriptor 'Advanced Practitioner' provided the *domain* that focussed the action of the community members. A strong sense of *shared purpose* emerged from the research and the notion of layered dimensions of *practice* at the heart of the AP role emerged as highly relevant. Thriving was enhanced through APs being seen as authentic teachers and also carrying sophisticated coaching and mentoring skills.

The varied experiences of members of APConnect constellations and other communities highlighted by the research participants ensured that *legitimate peripheral learning* was taking place in these collaborative spaces. Such learning often had emotional dimensions where the shared passion for the AP role, and its significance, that characterised the communities of practice was also important in enhancing the resilience of APs during the pandemic. Related to legitimate peripheral participation, many examples of situated learning also emerged (see, for

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[10] Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press
[11] Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

example, in the AP context, Grayling 2018[12]). Learning and sharing opportunities were co-constructed within the communities that were specific to the lived role of Advanced Practitioner. In these contexts, situated learning was happening in different ways to that originally conceived by Lave and Wenger[13] in that the research revealed that it was pan-organisational communities that were important in enhancing the practice APs during the pandemic.

Organisational Culture

Having to operate in a largely virtual world during the pandemic strongly illuminated the middle space that APs occupy in their organisations. Their positioning on a surviving-thriving continuum may be influenced by tensions between their learning about practice in the external communities of practice and APs' experiences when attempting to bring this learning into their own organisation. Desire to act as *change agents* was often stifled by inflexible organisational hierarchies and imposed imperatives that compromised APs' agency and identities as guardians of high-quality teaching and learning. Brakewell's (2015[14]) development of the concept of *threatened identities* may well be helpful in exploring such dynamics further.

Such experiences were not universal. In several contexts the research revealed an apparent strengthening of cultures during the pandemic, which fostered the ability of APs to support teaching and learning. The importance of shared values was particularly important when values-informed learning, emerging from the constellations, coincided with those lived by leaders and managers in the APs' own organisations. Donovan (2019[15]) highlights in particular the significance of trust as a value central to fostering such cultures.

When the pandemic sharpened an appreciation of what was important, the potential of APs to act as *boundary spanners[16]* was enhanced and they thrived in the expansive spaces that resulted. Donovan et.al. (2021[17]) provide a detailed analysis of these dynamics in the co-evaluation of the APConnect Programme.

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[12] Ian Grayling (2018). Facilitating Professional Development And High-Performance Through Situated Learning. Education and Training Foundation. London. At https://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/OTLA-AP-guide-SituatedLearning-Final_30.10.18.pdf [accessed 1.7.21]

[13] Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1990). Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[14] Breakwell, G.M., 2015. Coping with threatened identities. Psychology Press.

[15] Christina Donovan (2019) Distrust by design? Conceptualising the role of trust and distrust in the development of Further Education policy and practice in England, Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 24:2-3, 185-207,

[16] Jeanne Ho , Trivina Kang , Imran Shaari (2020) Leading from the middle: vice-principals in Singapore as boundary spanners Journal of Educational Administration. 59:2.

[17] touchconsulting (2021). *Re-thinking the role of the Advanced Practitioner: AP Connect: Year 3 Evaluation Strand Final Report (2020-2021).* Burton-on-Trent: touchconsulting Ltd, on behalf of the Education and Training Foundation. At: https://touchconsulting.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/AP-Connect-Y3-Evaluation-Report-Final.pdf

Figure 7: Advanced Practitioner Model from APConnect co-evaluation (Donovan 2021)
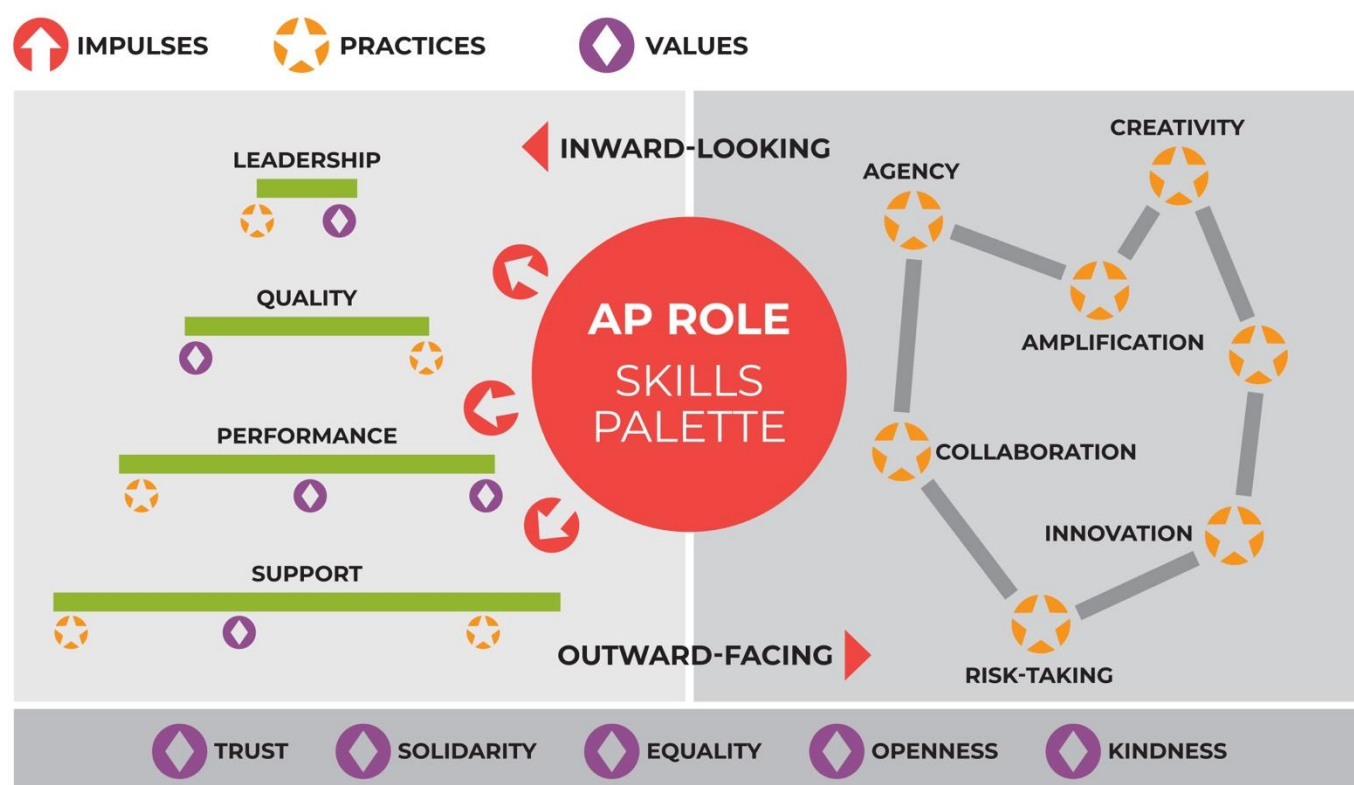
This model was used to frame some of the discussions in the spotlight interviews. The organisational dimensions affecting how APs work are found on the left-hand side of the model and the values and practices of APs expressed in the communities of practice on the right. The two sides are separated by porous boundaries.

The research suggested that the interplay between outside to inside trajectories and between the different organisational spaces suggested by the above model created examples of *dualities* (Wenger 1998[18]). Here tensions between members of communities of practice and their resolutions can strengthen organisational communities of practice and enhance *knowledge exchange*. The creative nature of dualities emerged as important in helping APs thrive during the pandemic and the research pointed to the significance of negotiation of practice, collective sense making, dialogue and shared ownership of the issues created by the pandemic.

Virtual Architectures

AP work was affected in many different ways by virtual activities during the pandemic. Online platforms became the main vehicles for teaching and learning and for supporting learners. APs engaged in the same ways with colleagues in their own organisation and in the cross organisational communities of practice and other collective endeavours they were involved in. Although the use of specific on-line meeting platforms often featured in the research it was clear that APs were engaging with a very wide range of virtual platforms. The pandemic heightened

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[18] Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

the depth of this engagement, which was further enhanced through *'champions'* (see, for example, White 2021[19], Mycroft 2020 [20], and Mycroft and Wilkinson 2020[21]) skilfully constructing virtual spaces using tools that quickly became transparent in exposing rich dialogue and debate. The tools became *enablers* that allowed AP interactions to be amplified and enriched rather than barriers to conversations.

A picture from the research arose of *complex virtual spaces*. APs that thrived accessed those spaces that were thoughtfully curated to foster a culture of care as well as open professional dialogue. Some APs found the virtual landscape noisy, dense, and hard to navigate, serving as a reminder that one type of virtual engagement was unlikely to fit all. This finding chimes with the work of Dubé et.al. (2006[22]) in constructing a typography of virtual communities of practice. The authors identify 21 'structuring characteristics', although not all of which would appear to apply to virtual communities of practice specifically. Key themes included: *Demographics, Organisational Context, and Technological Environment.*

Kimble and Hildreth (2005[23]) draw on similar issues in exploring the dynamics of virtual communities of practice and emphasise the importance of dualities discussed above. The authors highlight Wenger's *participation/reification* duality in particular. In this context, reification refers to the crystallisation of the activities of virtual communities of practice into stories, artefacts and modules that reinforce meaning and sense making.

Recent research by Lynne Taylerson[24], looking at Twitter specifically, highlights these dynamics in further education through three lenses. Her analysis brings richer perspectives into play when considering the model in figure 6 and particularly the dualities that may exist between Communities and Virtual Architecture. Her 'Pedagogy' and 'Learning Community' lenses reveal the power of teachers when collaborating to accrue both the technical and practical knowledge that was in play supporting APs to thrive. Taylerson's third lens: 'Identity and Voice' relates closely to the organisational culture element of this research where thriving APs became autonomous and empowered during the pandemic.

[19] https://www.fenews.co.uk/fevoices/224-podcasts/71928-em-booth-fe-is-the-all-about-relationships
[20] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmlITaSWZIY
[21] https://sites.google.com/view/joyfuleducation/home
[22] Line Dubé, Anne Bourhis, and Réal Jacob (2006) Towards a Typology of Virtual Communities of Practice. Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management Volume 1, 2006
[23] Kimble, C. and Hildreth, P. (2005), "Dualities, distributed communities of practice and knowledge management", Journal of Knowledge Management, Vol. 9 No. 4, pp. 102-113.
[24] Taylerson L. (2020) Identity in Focus: Examining FE Practitioners' Informal Professional Learning Through the Lenses of Online Community Dialogues. In: Gregson M., Spedding P. (eds) Practice-Focused Research in Further Adult and Vocational Education. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham

CONCLUSION

The research described above was commissioned and completed over a few weeks in the spring of 2021. It has only scratched the surface in exploring how Advanced Practitioners were operating during the pandemic, there is so much more to tell. However, we are not presenting the analysis here as a superficial one. Over 160 participants from a range of further education organisations across England contributed to the research. A diversity of stories emerged, a few were harrowing and distressing, others were hopeful and inspiring. All are important.
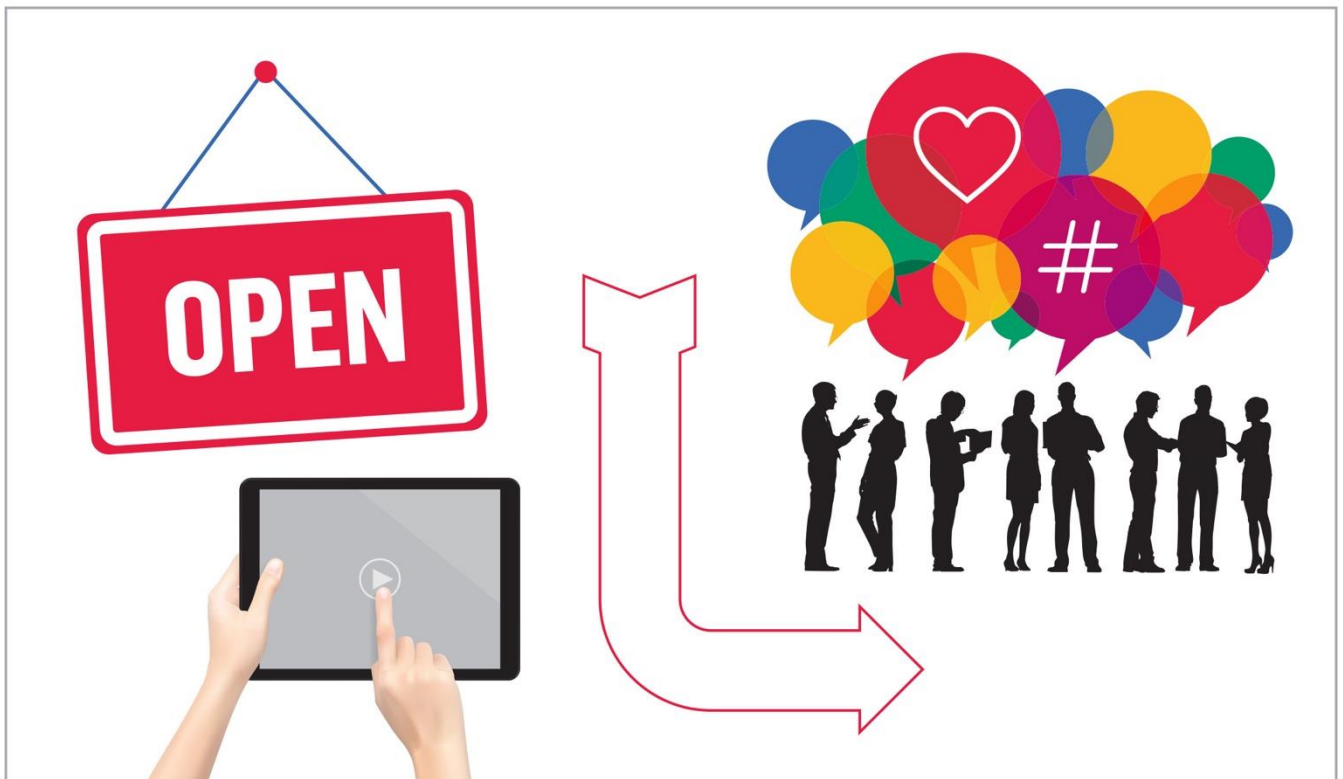
At the time of writing, it is far from clear how APs and the further education sector will emerge from the pandemic. Nevertheless, we have learnt from the research that it would be naïve to attempt to position APs on a surviving-thriving spectrum. If we did, some APs would certainly be at one end of the continuum or the other but locating them in this way would be reductionist and unfaithful to their accounts. Every AP's situation was unique and influenced by the situation they found themselves in at particular moments, in particular spaces, with particular people. However, the research identified that social interaction became so precious during the pandemic and it is hoped that the conditions that fostered this for APs are articulated clearly in this report.

Lessons learnt: APs Thriving or Surviving
- Pan organisational communities strengthened collaboration and reduced isolation during the pandemic
- Deliberately curated virtual spaces were important in fostering a sense of care and professional dialogue between APs
- The positive resolution of tensions/dualities between different spaces that APs inhabit was important in securing their identity and purpose.
- In many instances supportive organisational cultures were strengthened during the pandemic. This was not a given and required significant investment by those supporting APs.
- Trust emerged as a critical value for APs to thrive during the pandemic.

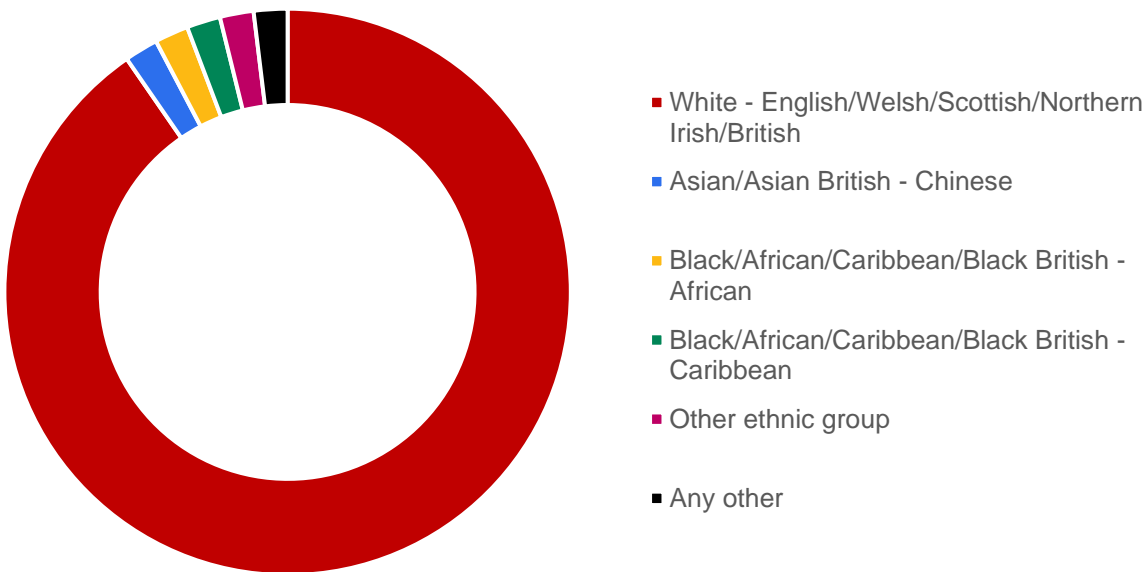# APPENDIX: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS.

Gender

102 (77%) of the respondents identified as cisfemale with the remaining 31 (23%) of the respondents identifying as cismale.

■ CIS Female ■ CIS Male

Ethnicity

122 (94%) of the respondents identified as *White – English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British*

■ White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British

■ Asian/Asian British - Chinese

■ Black/African/Caribbean/Black British - African

■ Black/African/Caribbean/Black British - Caribbean

■ Other ethnic group

■ Any other

The AP Connect programme in 2020/21 included a mentoring strand for participants of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic origin. One participant commented on this initiative as being a major benefit to the programme in helping them: '*Connect with my equalities mentor and being brave enough to try and put big ideas into practice.*'

Disability

APConnect programme included also included a mentoring strand for those declaring a disability.

14 (11%) respondents considered that they had a disability. 119 (89%) considered that they did not.

■ Yes   ■ No
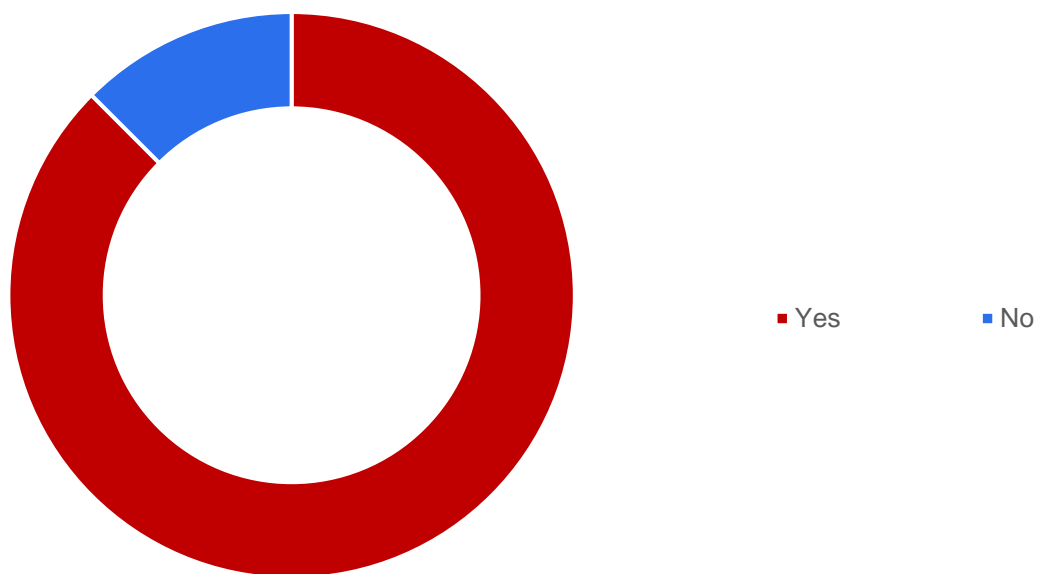
Age

7 (5%) respondents were 18-30 years old

85 (64%) respondents were 31-50 years old
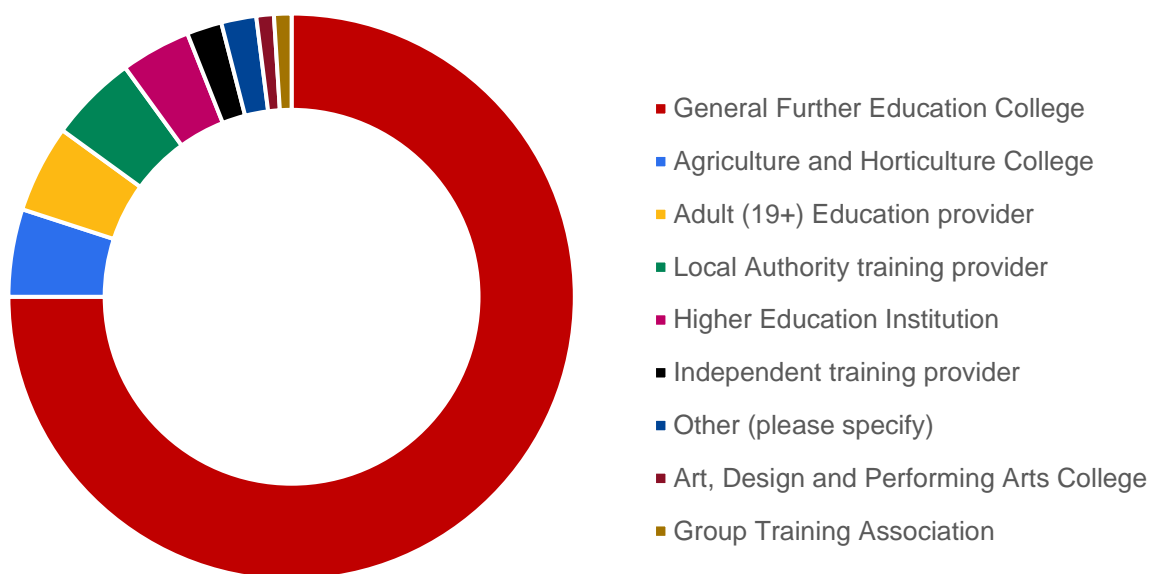
41 (31%) respondents were over 50 years old.

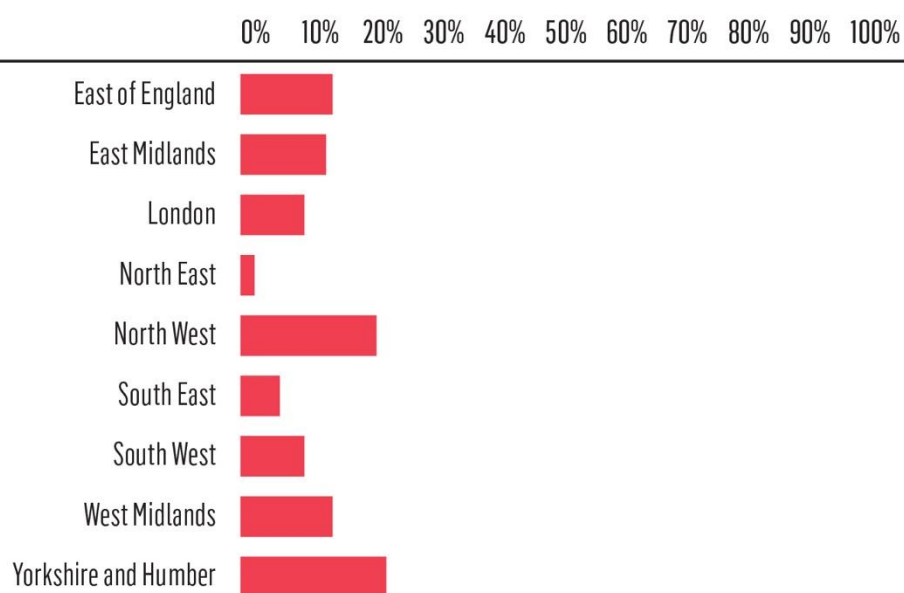■ 18-30   ■ 31-50   ■ 50 or older
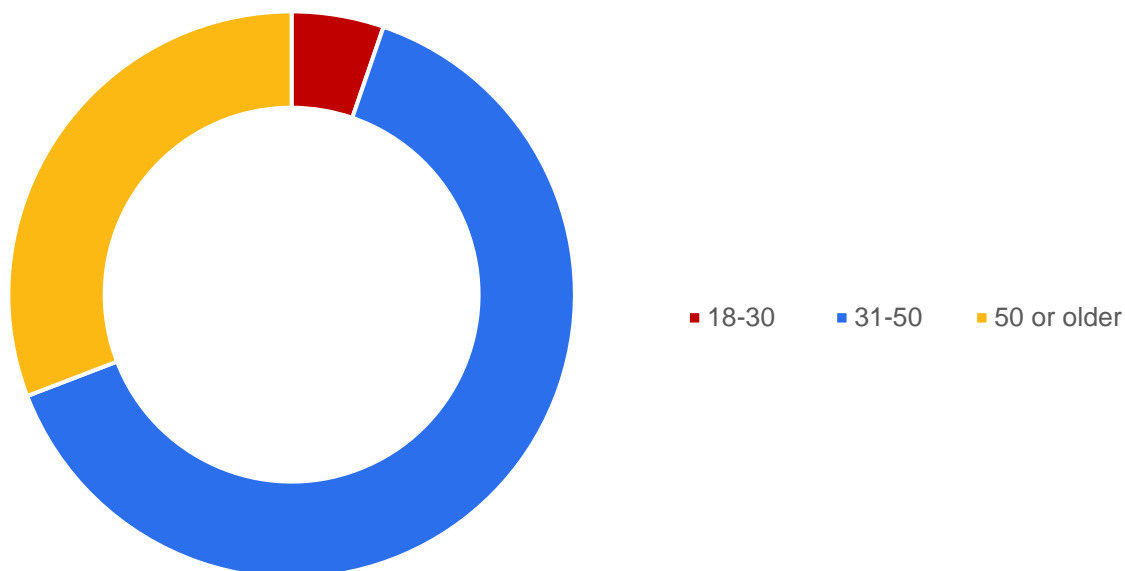
Organisation type

Three quarters of the respondents were based in a General Further Education College

Provider Type	Number of responses	%
General Further Education College	94	75
Agriculture and Horticulture College	7	6
Adult (19+) education provider	7	6
Local Authority training provider	6	5

- General Further Education College
- Agriculture and Horticulture College
- Adult (19+) Education provider
- Local Authority training provider
- Higher Education Institution
- Independent training provider
- Other (please specify)
- Art, Design and Performing Arts College
- Group Training Association

Region

Contractual Status

	Number of responses	%
Full time, permanent	94	75
Part time, permanent	23	18
Part time, fixed term contract	4	3
Full time, fixed term contract	4	3
Sessional (contracted hours)	1	1
Term time, permanent	0	0
Term time, fixed contract	0	0
Sessional (zero hours)	0	0
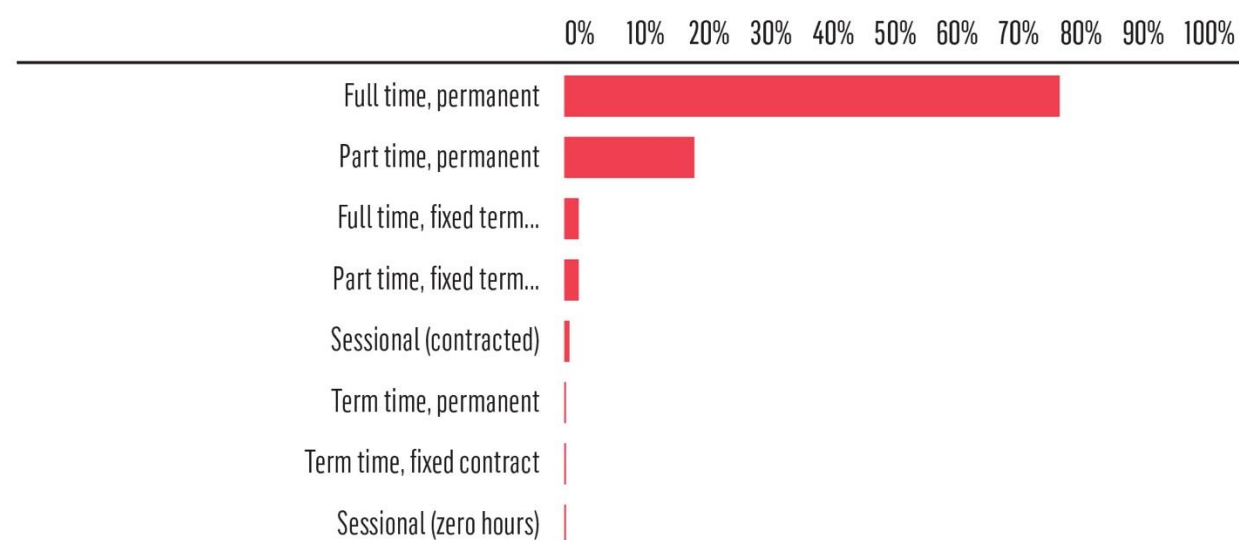
Length of Time as an Advanced Practitioner

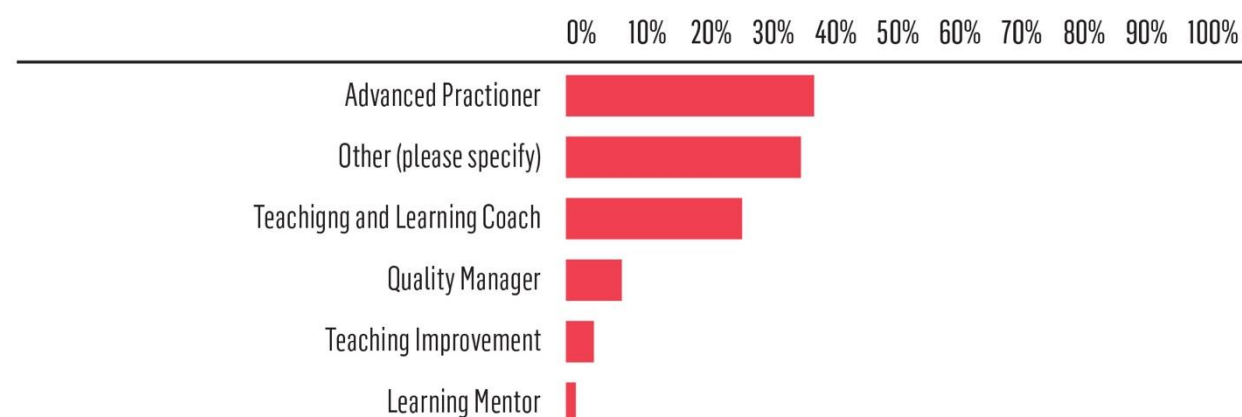|	Number of responses	%
More than 5 years	39	31
3-5 years	36	29
1-2 years	26	21
Less than 12 months	16	13
I'm not an AP yet	9	7
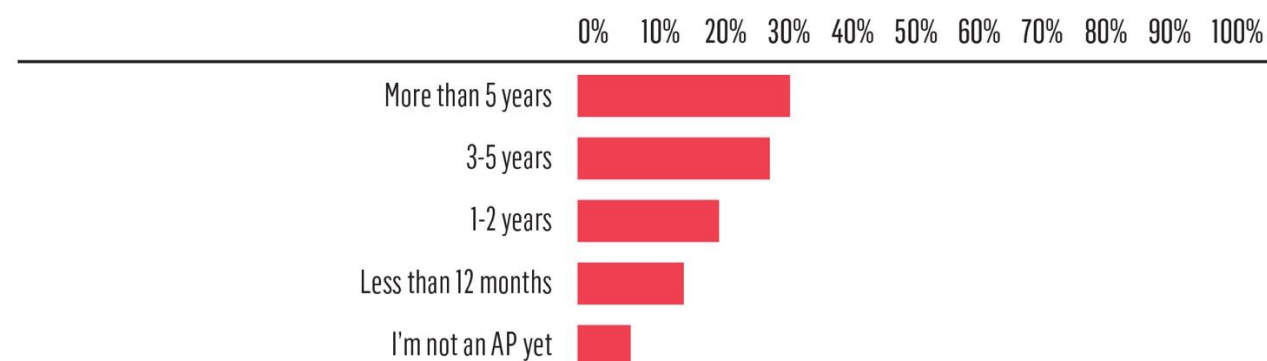
Job Title

The responses revealed a large variety of job titles. Aside from 'advanced practitioner', there were 43 in total.

	Number of responses	%
Advanced Practitioner	47	37
Teaching and Learning Coach	32	25
Quality Manager	11	9
Teaching Improvement Practitioner	6	5
Learning Mentor	2	2
Other (please specify)	44	35

Other role titles included:

Advanced Quality Practitioner
Assistant Head of Department
Blended Learning Expert Practitioner
Cfem Research Lead
Co-ordinator
CPD and Learning Manager
DDSL
English Practitioner: Lecturer
ESOL tutor
Exec director quality
Head of Learning & Development
Key Worker
Lead IQA for English, ESOL and maths
Learning and Development Coach
Learning Development Coordinator
Learning Technologies Manager
Learning Technologist
Lecturer
Maths & English Manager

Mental Health Coach
Professional Development Lead
Professional Development Manager
Professional Standards Learning Coach
Quality Assurance and Improvement Lead
Quality Improvement Coordinator
Quality Improvement Officer
Teacher
Teacher Educator
Teaching and Learning Manager
Teaching and Learning Mentor
Teaching and Learning Quality Lead
Teaching Learning Digital Innovation Manager
Teaching, Learning & Digital Lead
Teaching, Learning and Innovation Coach
Tutor
Tutor and IQA
Workforce Development Lead

AP role remunerated?

Only

	Number of responses	%
No	80	65
Yes	43	35

Comments here included:

1 band higher

"0.5 contract for AP role 0.5 contract teaching "

On DTL scale (level 1 of management)

I have been on a project supporting APs in the organisation

I have time allocated for the research.

3k uplift on top lecturer band

honorarium

I only deliver staff training.

It is my full-time role

Not much!

Part of my job role which I love

Slight enhancement on a lecturing wage.

3k increase on top lecturer band

50% of my role is as a mentor 50% lecturer

It is my full time role (secondment for 18 months) with 4-6 hours class teaching included.

I get more money but no time off a full-time timetable

I have had separate time for this allocated in my timetable. Year 1: 6 hours. Year 2: 2 hours (new manager and tightened belts)

Time allocated and an additional 3.5K onto pay scale

Same salary as lecturers

Funded part time role, no teaching.

I am a lecturer 0.5 and LaDC 0.5 on lecturer salary

The proportion of experienced (over 3 years) APs that attracted additional remuneration was 43% was slightly higher than the whole cohort.

The proportion of APs from General Further Education Colleges that were paid extra was 47%. 6% of APs from Adult Education or Local Authority settings were paid extra.

Amount of remission for AP role

	Number of responses	%
More than one day per week	41	36
None	30	27
2-5 hours per week	29	26
1 day per week	9	8
1 hour per week	4	4
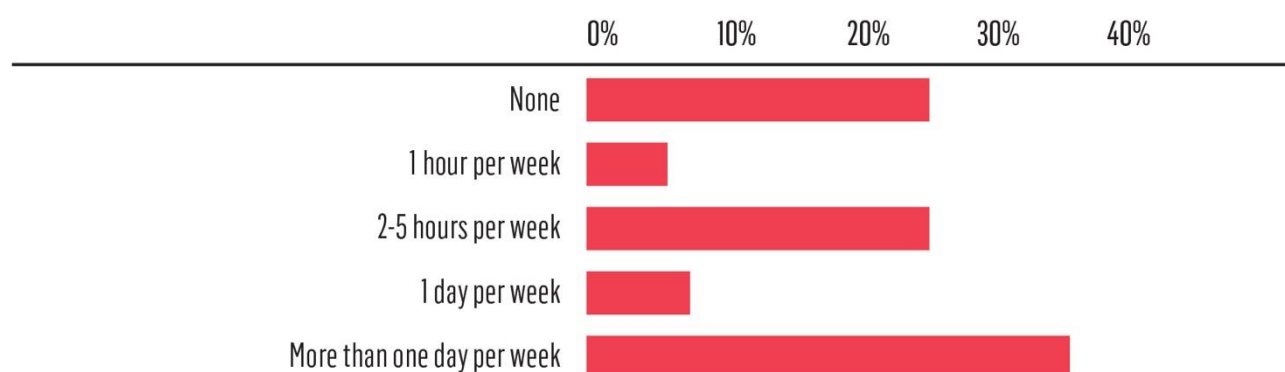
Comments included:

I work in addition to my normal hours

As above

2 days a week

Full time AP

Only in the last year has the remittance been increased to 18 hours

I teach 4 hours a week as contracted and the other 33 hours is for Teaching, Learning and Assessment development

I teach 1 of the 4 days I work, but am a cross college TLC, and there are only 2 of us.

I have a 0.4 contract for AQP

In the last 14 months we've been a smaller team with increased remission so 18 hrs remittance

It's included as part of my role

It is part of my job role to deliver training and support teaching staff

I teach one day a week and the rest of my time is AP focused

6 hours per week

Role is full time

6 hours though the week

Role is 0.6 AP and 0.2 teaching

It is my full time role

Full time post with 0.2 teaching

Not currently teaching

Built into my role

I have a separate contract 0.5 for a teaching and learning mentor. My other 0.5 is a lecturer. I am on the same MG teaching scale

The hours allocated do not meet with duties. Currently in negotiation.

I do 1 day teaching 4 days AP

I don't currently teach, but when I did teach I only taught 6 hours per week as an AP

N/A coaching role only

I get 4 hours remission. One of these hours is taken up by our two golden hours

This is worked around a teaching timetable

It's a 0.4 contract

10 hours teaching remission

It's part of my overall job role

3 days TLC/ 2 days teaching

Again, I manage the APs so my whole job role is doing this.

Part of the job.

10 hours

0.5 post

*50% of my hours. I'm part-time 0.8, so it works out as two full days for the AP role.*

0.5 AP 0.5 tutor

2 days 0.4fte

Half of my hours. I'm on a 0.8 contact so 0.4 teaching and 0.4 AP time, which works out as 2 full days.

43% of respondents from GFEs experienced more than one day a week compared to 36% of the whole AP cohort. 82% of responses from APs from Adult Learning or Local Authority contexts indicated that they had no remission.

Advanced Teacher Skills Status

- No
- Yes
- Not interested
- No, but interested
- Working towards it
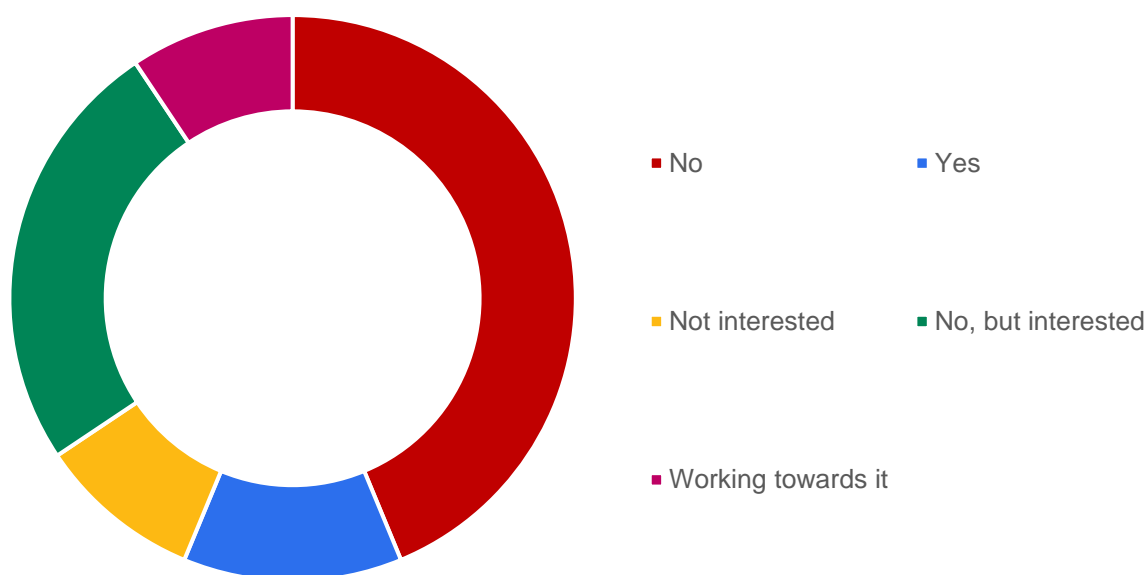
One respondent observed that '*being part of AP connect and doing my ATS has contributed to*

the last 6 months of rapid professional development for me personally and in my role'.

Another observed that *by completing the ATS quality project I am being encouraged to solve issues and train in the digital area.*

Thank you