It's a communication jungle out there…

A guide to communicating with post-16 education and training

Jaime Greenup

lsn

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Acknowledgements

About the author

Jaime Greenup is passionate about improving communications with the post-16 education and training sector. Her research into the topic has included marketing effectiveness studies, assessments of Learning and Skills Network (LSN) marketing messages and distribution channels, and a review of sector communications as a whole.

The results of this survey complement her research to date and directly support initial findings. The recommendations will be considered and actioned in all future LSN communications.

Jaime has been a member of the LSN marketing team since July 2006. During her time at the LSN she has been involved in creating and distributing marketing communications to the sector. She has also worked with a number of government departments and agencies to develop communication messages on their behalf.

Foreword

Jargon bedevils our sector; in reports, in policy documents, in funding guidance – even in marketing for training and professional development. When someone starts at the Learning and Skills Network from outside the sector, we often have to provide a 26-page dictionary of education acronyms so that they have an even chance of understanding what's going on.

This report aims to stimulate debate about the way that government departments, agencies and others communicate with organisations across post-16 education and training. The findings show that jargon isn't just an annoyance; it's a genuine problem that acts as a real barrier to understanding. The average manager in a college, work-based learning or adult learning provider feels swamped enough without the next thing that falls from the sky being written in gobbledegook.

Although this report throws down a much-needed challenge to departments and agencies, I believe there is also an implicit challenge to providers themselves. As a former college principal, I recall the confusion and frustration of new governors and board members when suddenly faced with the impenetrable shared language used day to day in the college. At its worst, this shared language can colour our communications with communities, employers and even learners – ultimately shutting out the very people we exist to serve.

I believe that the various departments and agencies owe it to our sector to lead by example and communicate in plain English. I think that the sector's lecturers, trainers, managers and leaders will follow that example if set. Most people I speak to share my desire for a sector that is transparent, accountable and responsive – uniquely capable of engagement and dialogue with all parts of our communities. Communicating in an open and accessible way is an essential step on that journey.

At the Learning and Skills Network, we do not consider ourselves immune from the accusations of jargon and sector-speak set out in this report. We are going to try to do better, we hope you will too.

John Stone
Chief Executive
Learning and Skills Network

1 | Executive summary

For everybody whose job involves communication, the importance of plain English cannot be underestimated.

Government departments and the agencies working with them (ourselves included) need people to take an interest in the information they give out and to be able to understand it. Otherwise why bother doing it? Sadly, post-16 education and training is often accused of having a language all of its own, riddled with jargon, policy-speak and acronyms.

This research report investigates how government departments and agencies communicate with post-16 education and training organisations, and how those working in it perceive the communications. In making recommendations our aim is not to criticise – this is very much a guidance document. We hope it will be a starting point for improving the quality and clarity of communication throughout our sector.

The survey was launched on 4 July 2008: 994 people returned completed questionnaires, giving responses from all types of post-16 education and training organisations throughout England.

Key findings from the survey

1. **Jargon in post-16 education and training is a problem: Many across our target audiences believe jargon is common and that it limits their understanding of what we are trying to say. Many terms commonly used in communication messages are judged to be jargon and there are too many acronyms.**

   The survey began by investigating to what extent staff think the use of inappropriate jargon or a lack of plain English is common in the communications they receive.

   - Three-quarters of staff say jargon is very common or common in communications from government departments or agencies.

   - Only 7% of all respondents think jargon is uncommon or very uncommon.

   The survey asked whether jargon in policy updates, funding guidance, newsletters or promotional flyers ever prevents staff from reading important external information.

   - 83% of staff say jargon has prevented them from reading important external information at least some of the time.

   - More than a quarter are frequently or always put off.

The survey then asked whether jargon ever prevents staff from fully understanding important information. The evidence shows that not only is jargon off-putting – it's often a barrier to understanding.

- 86% of all respondents say jargon has limited their understanding of communications.

- This includes 27% who say jargon always or frequently prevents them from understanding important information.

- Only 5% find that the information they receive is usually clear and easy to read.

Next the survey took some of the words and phrases that are commonly used in post-16 education and training, and asked people to rank them on a scale from 'jargon' to 'accepted as plain English'. This identified a number of terms that should be used with caution.

Those rated as jargon or mild jargon by a substantial proportion of respondents include:

- NEETs

- line of learning

- m-learning

- e-maturity

- evidence-based policy

- action research

- agenda

- scaffolding learning.

Staff also dislike the excessive use of acronyms. Feedback indicates that the use of acronyms produces a 'sector language' that is difficult to fully understand.

2. **What about communication methods? Results showed a strong preference for receiving communication by email – but that other forms of communication also need to be considered. A significant minority still like to receive some types of information by post.**

The next section of the survey identified the most common and effective communication channels, and the most appropriate for different types of information.

Responses showed that staff keep informed through a variety of channels.

- 70% keep informed through important documents (eg funding guidance, policy circular)

- 62% from flyers for continuing professional development (CPD) events received via email

- 59% from electronic newsletters

- 50% from emails promoting new publications

- 50% from printed newsletters.

Asked what format of communication staff prefer to receive from government departments and agencies for which types of information, responses highlighted the importance of email.

- Over three-quarters prefer emails for CPD event marketing and subsequent reminders.

- For important documents, such as funding documents or policy circulars, as many prefer a hard copy as prefer email.

- Only 1% of respondents feel that sector magazines/newspapers are the right medium to promote training events. This medium has been used extensively for this type of promotion by many sector communicators.

3. **Communication frequency and timing: More than half of respondents say their workload prevents them from keeping up to date, while similar proportions indicate that they receive more information than they would like. And if the materials do get read, most of them will be deleted or in the bin after just three minutes.**

The survey then aimed to assess how much information sector staff receive, how often and whether they actually have time to read it.

- 60% of all respondents indicate that they received more information than they want.

- Only 28% say they receive the right amount.

- On average a third of all respondents receive more than one piece of external material per week a week, with some receiving a great deal more.

The survey also asked 'To what extent do you agree with the following statement – My workload prevents me from reading important external information and keeping in touch with what's going on in education and training?'

- 57% feel their workload prevents them from reading important external information.

- Only 19% of staff disagree or strongly disagree with the statement.

- Asked how much time they would normally devote to reading external communication materials, most communication materials are reviewed by respondents for three minutes or less.

The survey also found that 54% of all respondents prefer seven or more weeks notice of a continuing professional development event. If the event promotion is received later than that, it will be considered by less than half of the target audience. Most staff prefer 10–12 weeks notice.

The findings highlight the need for communication messages to the sector to be clear and relevant. And all departments and agencies should actively manage the number and frequency of communication messages they send.

4. Language and tone: This section highlights the fact that messages need to be more focused on the needs of the reader. Clear language, even down to the title we use for the sector, is crucial. It shows that there is some room for humour, albeit used cautiously. And staff prefer information to focus on the learner rather than on policy.

Given the range of titles assigned to post-16 education and training over the years, the survey asked staff which best describes their sector.

- 33% of all respondents chose the title 'further education'

- 20% prefer 'learning and skills sector'

- 17% prefer 'post-16 education and training'.

But when broken down by organisation, we get different results. Although 55% of respondents from colleges prefer 'further education sector', this term does not sit comfortably with work-based learning providers or adult and community learning providers.

However, since 'post-16 education and training' ranks highly across most organisation types this report uses this title as it is the most inclusive overall.

The survey also investigated the tone of the language used in communications from government departments and agencies, and which tone works best for their audience.

- 52% of all respondents prefer an even balance of formality and informality

- 37% would like to see more humour within communication materials

- 43% prefer an even balance of speaking optimistically and recognising challenges within communication materials

- 47% of respondents prefer the focus to be on the learner rather than on policy within communication materials on the whole – 20% of respondents prefer a sole focus on the learner.

2 | Introduction and research aims

At first glance, communicating with the post-16 education and training sector might seem like an easy task. It is a well-defined audience, there are a variety of communication channels and most organisations appear to be receptive – after all, they actively implement education initiatives. So far, so good.

Now add in the number and scale of initiatives, policies and programmes being promoted at any one time. Consider the number of government departments and agencies that are distributing messages. List the media the sector is exposed to every day and finally consider the tone of the messages. You soon realise that it's not as straightforward as you might have hoped.

This report details the findings from an online survey distributed to a cross-section of people working in post-16 education and training. The survey, its distribution and subsequent analysis were carried out by the Learning and Skills Network (LSN).

The key objective of the research was to assess how people working in the sector receive and perceive information from government departments and/or agencies.

But the report isn't just about statistics. It also offers helpful advice for all who work in government departments and agencies and who communicate with the sector. It doesn't claim to provide all the answers to creating foolproof communications, but it does try to lay foundations to improve the quality and frequency of communication messages to the sector.

The research was broken down into the following four themes:

- **jargon in education and training** – is jargon a common element in materials produced for post-16 education and training organisations? Is it having a detrimental effect?

- **communication methods** – are the communication methods currently used the most effective? Are there any alternatives?

- **communication frequency and timing** – when and how often do post-16 education and training organisations prefer to receive information? Do sector staff fear their inbox?

- **language and tone** – are the materials written appropriately for the target audience? How important is language?

A secondary objective was to assess whether organisation type or role influenced communication preferences.

This report details the methodology for designing, distributing and analysing the survey and then presents the results under each of the four themes and makes recommendations for communicators.

3 | Methodology

The Learning and Skills Network (LSN) conducted an online survey on the effectiveness of communication with post-16 education and training organisations. The survey was developed to gather information about a variety of communication elements including language, medium, frequency and tone. That information can then be used by everyone who communicates with the sector to improve future communication materials and ideally make them more effective.

3.1 Questionnaire design

The survey was designed by the author and the LSN research team, and consisted of a combination of multiple-choice, rank-item and open text questions that required respondents to select the appropriate response box or insert an answer in a free-text field.

The survey was designed in an electronic format using the online survey software SNAP. The software was used to upload the survey and generate a web link that individuals could click on to access the survey.

Appendix 1 contains a copy of the survey questions.

3.2 Questionnaire distribution

The survey was launched on 4 July 2008 and emailed to contacts across England. The survey captured staff at all levels of all types of post-16 education and training organisations including colleges, work-based learning, offender learning and adult and community learning.

The dataset of contacts used for survey distribution was collated from the Learning and Skills Network's Customer Information Management System.[1] Overall, the survey generated a good level of response with 994 completed surveys submitted by the closing date of 18 July 2008.

The total sample size of 994 provides a 95% confidence level of accurately representing the views of provider staff with a +/- 3% confidence interval.

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[1] LSN's extensive dataset of sector contacts is generated through the course of its programmes, support services and research activity. The dataset is representative of lecturer/teacher/trainer, senior manager, manager and support staff roles and the full spectrum of organisations in post-16 education and training across England.

3.3 Sample characteristics

The following characteristics of the sample were collected with the survey – role, organisation type, sex and age – to ensure we had a balanced representation of all post-16 education and training organisations.

Role: The highest number of responses came from managers (eg curriculum managers, staff development managers) at 37%, closely followed by lecturers/teachers/trainers at 35%. There was also good representation of senior managers (eg principal, vice principal, chief executive officer (CEO), managing director) at 12% and support staff at 8%. The remaining 8% felt they did not fit into these categories and selected a free text option, the most common of which was consultant.

Organisation type: The breakdown of respondents based on organisation types provided a good sample range compared with the sector distribution averages. Half (50%) of respondents were from colleges, 21% were from work-based learning (WBL) organisations, 2% were from offender learning organisations, 9% were from adult and community learning (ACL) organisations and the remaining 18% felt they did not fit into these categories and selected a free text option. The most common of the free text responses were: private companies, self-employed, local authorities and consultancies.

Sex: Most respondents to the survey were female, the breakdown being 63% female and 37% male. The gender ratio in the sample is similar to the general composition of the sector.

Age: 64% of all respondents were aged 45–59, which fits well with the average age in the sector; 22% of all respondents were aged 31–44; 11% were aged 60+ years and 3% of all respondents were less than 30.

The full breakdown of the sample in terms of role, organisation type, sex and age is presented in Appendix 2.

4 | Survey results and analysis

This section details the results of each survey question and, where appropriate, also draws out key points to consider when communicating with post-16 education and training providers. It's worth noting that all recommendations apply equally to us here at the Learning and Skills Network – and we don't deny that we have some work ahead of us to make sure we are communicating effectively.

The results are presented in four themes:

- jargon in education and training
- communication methods
- communication frequency and timing
- language and tone.

Where results have significance by role or organisation type we have highlighted them.[2]

The summary of survey responses is presented in Appendix 3.

4.1 Jargon in education and training

The Learning and Skills Network has often received feedback that there seems to be a second language prevalent in the sector that could leave anyone looking in from the outside confused and overwhelmed. Current communications often use jargon or buzz words rather than plain English in a manner that is, at best, off-putting and at worst, an active barrier to understanding.

These communications also often assume the reader has a certain level of prior knowledge and understanding which, if not present, will ultimately hinder readability and undermine the purpose of the communication.

This section of the survey sought respondents' views on the amount of jargon used in communication materials distributed to post-16 education and training organisations. Do we need to get back to basics in our communications?

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[2] Please note that because it was a long survey not all respondents answered all the questions and so responses will not always equal 100%.

4.1.1 To what extent do you think the use of inappropriate jargon or a lack of plain English is commonplace in the communications you receive?

With so much feedback related to the over-use of jargon in the sector it was inevitable that we should start the survey with this question, asking people directly about what they think of the communications they receive. Is it riddled with code? Is it appropriate?

Alarmingly, 75% of all respondents thought that jargon and a lack of plain English were very common or common in the communications they receive from government departments or agencies. Only 7% of all respondents thought jargon was uncommon or very uncommon. There is clearly a problem.

As shown in Figure 1, 51% of all roles surveyed thought it was common for communications they receive to contain jargon or have a lack of plain English, with a further 24% of all roles feeling that it was a very common problem. Senior managers rated the problem the highest with 35% indicating it was a very common problem.

Figure 1 **To what extent do you think the use of inappropriate jargon or a lack of plain English is commonplace in the communications you receive?**
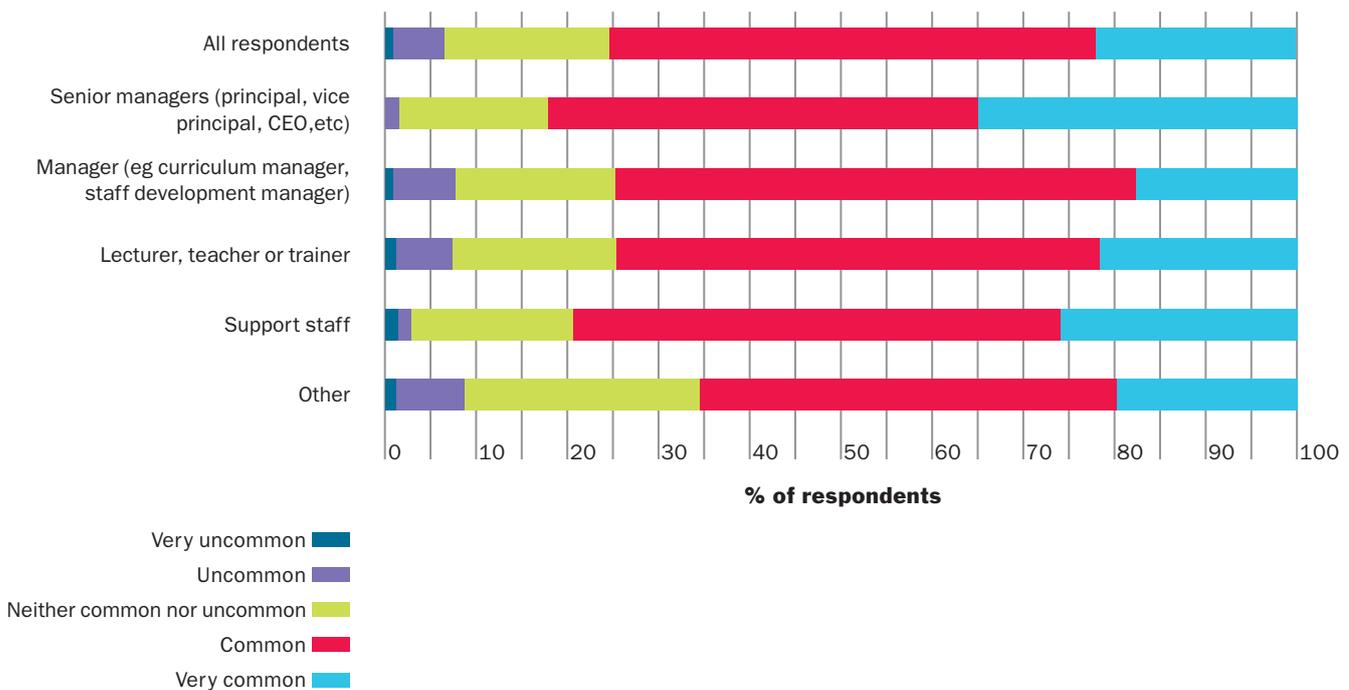
These results clearly show that there is a fundamental problem with the lack of plain English in communications to post-16 education and training providers. This criticism should be accepted by all government departments and agencies (including the Learning and Skills Network who work on behalf of these departments and agencies) and significant steps must be taken to ensure that messages are improved.

4.1.2.a Does jargon in policy updates, funding guidance, newsletters or promotional flyers ever prevent you from reading important external information?

Having determined how much of a problem jargon is in sector communications this question sought to assess the impact it has on readability.

Figure 2 shows that 83% of all respondents indicated that jargon has prevented them from reading important external information at least some of the time. More than a quarter are frequently or always put off. Only 6% of all respondents felt that the documents they received are usually clear and easy to read. The first question showed that jargon is a problem in sector communications and the second question starts to show how.

If jargon stands in the way of readability for so many of the target audience it should be considered a wake-up call for those of us who communicate with post-16 education and training sector. There is clear dissatisfaction with the levels of plain English currently used.

Figure 2 Does jargon in policy updates, funding guidance, newsletters or promotional flyers ever prevent you from reading important external information?

% of respondents
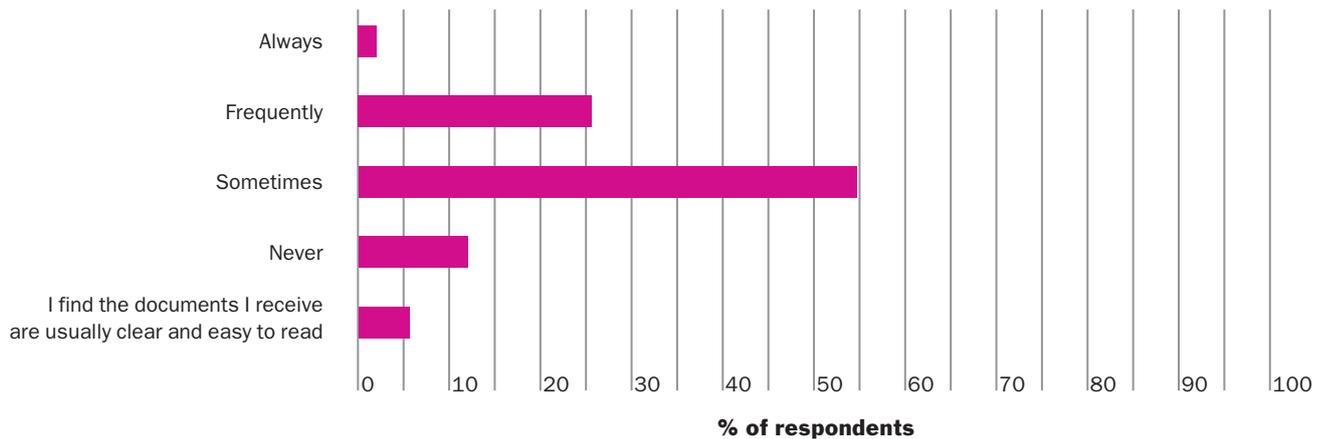
4.1.2.b Does jargon in policy updates, funding guidance, newsletters or promotional flyers ever prevent you from fully understanding important external information?

There is a difference between not reading something because the jargon is off-putting and not reading something because it is written in such a way that you can't understand it. Following 4.1.2.a, this question aimed to delve a little further into the impact of jargon and assess if it is a barrier to understanding.

Respondent feedback:

Government documents are awash with use of language that is often far out of the reach of mere mortals.

Figure 3 shows that 86% of all respondents felt that jargon had limited their understanding of communications. This included 27% of all respondents who felt jargon always or frequently prevents them from understanding important information. Only 5% of all respondents felt that the information they receive is usually clear and easy to read. Considering that some people find it a challenge to admit that they don't understand something, this figure may well understate the problem.

**Figure 3** **Does jargon in policy updates, funding guidance, newsletters or promotional flyers ever prevent you from fully understanding important external information?**
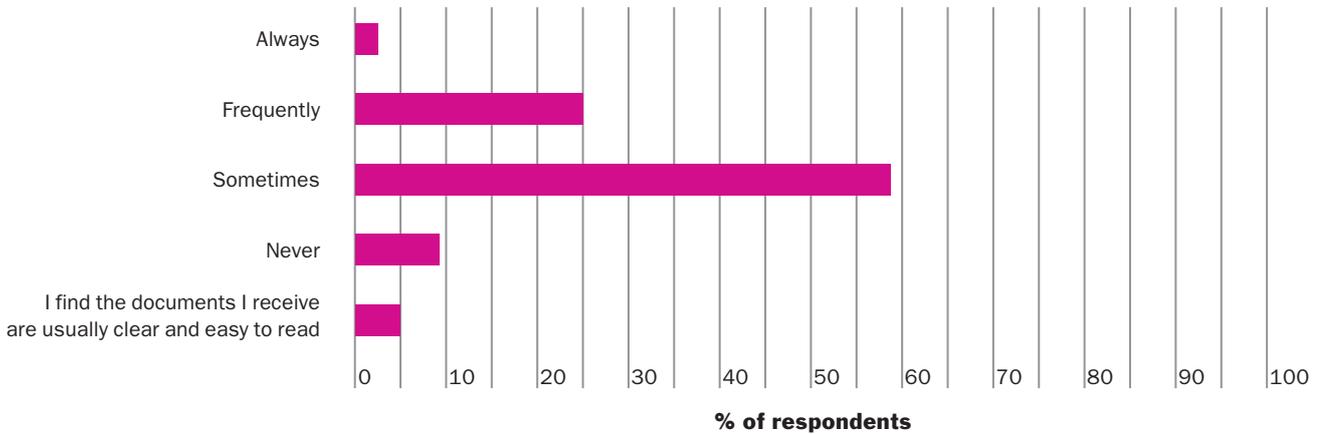
The evidence shows that the jargon used in our communications is not only off-putting; it's an active barrier to understanding. We have used jargon to the point where readability and understanding are greatly reduced. To put this into perspective, imagine a mailing where potentially over three-quarters of your target readership have ignored or failed to understand its content. It would be easier to put it in the bin yourself and save your readership the bother.

4.1.3 Education and training communications frequently use words that an outsider would struggle with – but are they jargon? How do you rank the following commonly used words and phrases…

The next step was to put some of the most frequently used terms under the microscope. This question asked respondents to rank terms based on a scale from 'jargon' to 'accepted as plain English'. Respondents were also given the option 'I don't know what this is' to ensure the full range of choices was provided. The results of this question should help determine just how understood some of those favoured words really are.

Figure 4 shows the ranked findings for each term.

Figure 4 Education and training communications frequently use words that an outsider would struggle with – but are they jargon? How do you rank the following commonly used words and phrases?
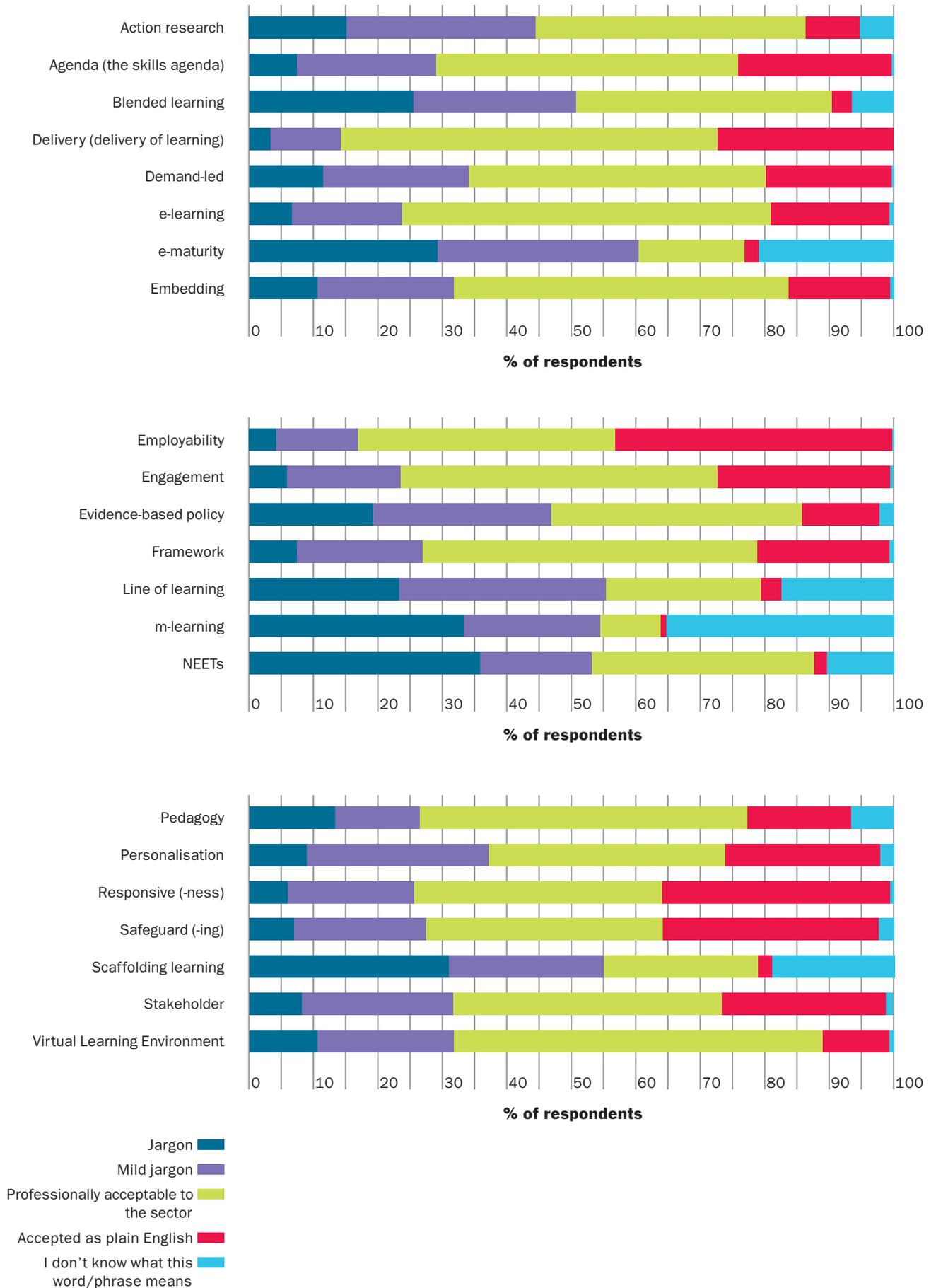
The results from this question clearly identified a number of terms that should be used with caution when communicating with the sector. The following terms were rated as jargon or mild jargon by a substantial percentage of respondents:

- e-maturity (60% of respondents)
- scaffolding learning (55%)
- line of learning (55%)
- m-learning (55%)
- NEETs – not in education, employment or training (53%)
- evidence-based policy (47%)
- action research (44%)
- agenda (29%).

Interestingly, all of those terms were also in the group where a significant proportion of respondents said that they did not know what the term meant. These include: e-maturity (21% of respondents), line of learning (17%), m-learning (35%), NEETs – not in education, employment or training (10%), and scaffolding learning (19%).

There were a number of terms that were mostly accepted as professional terms by the sector:

- delivery (by 58% of respondents)
- e-learning (57%)
- engagement (49%)
- framework (52%)
- pedagogy (51%)
- virtual learning environment (57%).

Terms that are mostly professionally accepted by the sector should still be treated with caution because substantial minorities still disagree and, when communicating, reaching simple majorities of the audience is not good enough. For example, although 51% of all respondents felt the term pedagogy was accepted in the sector, 26% rated it as either jargon or mild jargon and a further 7% didn't know what it meant. That is almost one-third of respondents who might be put off reading or not fully understand communications that contain the word pedagogy. To use the mailing example again, it could be the equivalent of throwing away one-third of your mailing before you start.

4.1.4 Which other jargon words or phrases really make you mad?

This question offered an open invitation to write freely about their jargon pet hates. Figure 5 shows some of the most common responses.

Figure 5 Which other jargon words or phrases really make you mad?

Sector-based jargon	General jargon	Terms used to describe students
☐ contextualised	☐ cascading	☐ units
☐ differentiation	☐ brainstorming	☐ candidate
☐ experiential learning	☐ going forward	☐ learners
☐ worklessness		
☐ upskilling		

Respondent feedback:

I am more annoyed by the use of acronyms than by jargon.

Approximately three-quarters of all responses to this question also commented on the excessive use of acronyms. Respondent feedback suggested that the use of acronyms was far too common in the sector; messages lost meaning because of the over-use and it produced a 'sector language' that was difficult for both new and established sector employees to fully understand. Where your very name is an acronym (the Learning and Skills Network, LSN, for example) this is a particular challenge. Respondents also preferred that each acronym be spelt out in full the first time the term is used.

4.1.5 Recommendations for communicators

Those of us working in government departments, agencies and other bodies that communicate with post-16 education and training providers have just received our communications report card – 'we must do better'. And the Learning and Skills Network doesn't come out of this unscathed. Many across our target audiences believe that jargon is commonplace and that it is limiting their understanding of what we're trying to say. It's official – jargon is a problem.

Key messages for communicators include:

1. We are guilty of using jargon and must take immediate steps to improve the use of plain English in our communications. If we don't, we are missing our target audiences and restricting their understanding across all roles and organisation types.

Respondent feedback:

Hijacking any word, phrase or acronym that is already in common use, or is actually a mis-use. For instance, FLT apparently now means Foundation Learning Tier, not Fork Lift Truck, as it has done for years.

2. Many of the key terms we use in communication messages are considered jargon. Even if we believe that a word or phrase is accepted as a professional term in the sector, it doesn't necessarily mean that everyone understands it.

3. Acronyms are a clear bugbear and we are all guilty of their over-use. Acronyms should be used with caution and conscious consideration should be given to spelling them out in full in the first time they are used, regardless of how obvious they seem.

4.2 Communication methods

Reports, newsletters, promotional flyers, websites, emails and sector-specific press – there is clearly a wide range of ways to reach organisations delivering post-16 education and training. This section of the survey aimed to identify the most common and effective – and the most appropriate for different types of information.

4.2.1 How do you generally keep informed about what's happening in education and training?

With such a variety of communication channels available to the sector, it should be easy for people to receive information. But the spread of responses in Figure 6 [3] shows that no one medium leads the charge. Survey respondents keep informed through a variety of channels: 70% through important documents (eg funding guidance, policy circular); 62% through flyers for continuing professional development (CPD) events received via email; 59% through electronic newsletters (eg *Connect* from the Association of Learning Providers, ALP); 50% from emails promoting new publications; and 50% from printed newsletters (eg LSN *Briefing*).

Figure 6   How do you generally keep informed about what's happening in education and training?
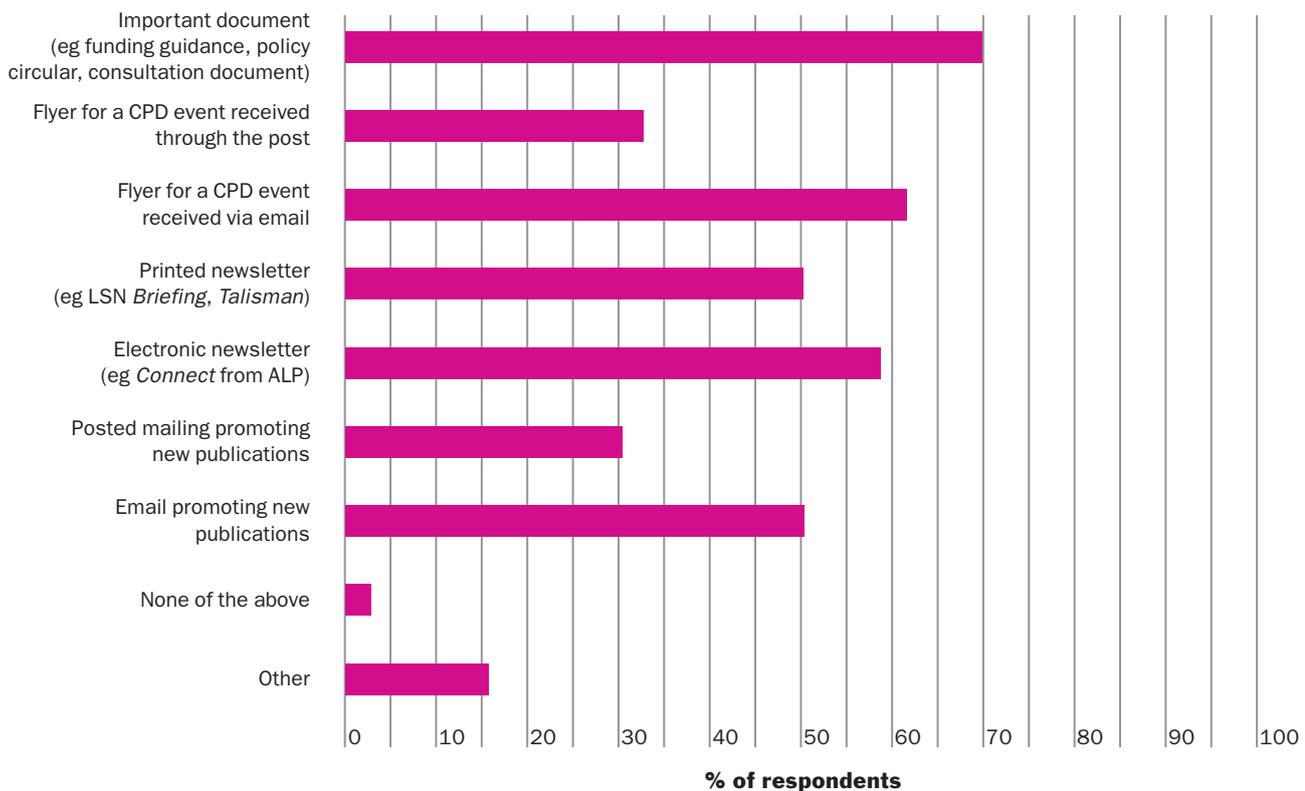
% of respondents

[3]   Please note that for this question respondents could select multiple options so the total responses add up to more than 100%.

When the type of communication received is compared with the role of respondents there are some differences between the communication channels used. However, this is more likely to be because of the materials people in different staff roles are sent, rather than what they choose to receive. For example, managers are more likely to keep informed via important documents such as policy and funding circulars as they receive more of them. It isn't surprising that lecturers/teachers/trainers or support staff don't use this type of information as much as they don't receive this information as often (if at all).

4.2.2 What format of communication do you prefer to receive from government departments and agencies for the following types of information?

If the above question showed how sector staff keep up to date, in what format do they prefer their information? The next question explored the different formats preferred for different categories of information. The results are set out in Figure 7.[4]

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[4]   Please note that for this question respondents could select multiple options so the total responses add up to more than 100%.

Figure 7 What format of communication do you prefer to receive from government departments and agencies for the following types of information?

% of respondents

Email
Post/hard copy
Websites
Sector magazines/newspapers
Text message
Phone call
I don't have a preference
I prefer not to receive this type of information
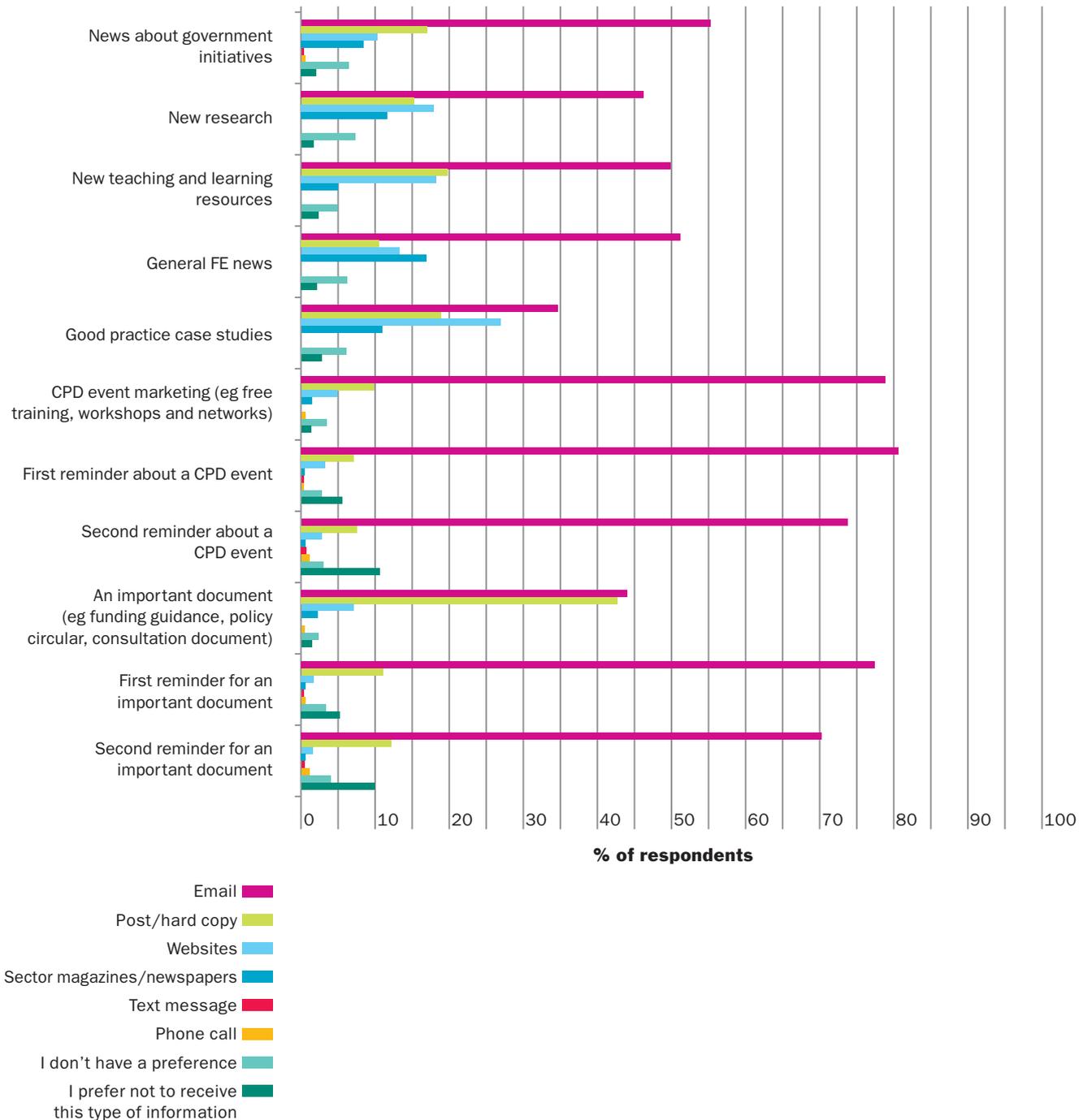
The clear finding from this section is the importance of email, with this format being preferred to any other in all categories. Over three-quarters of respondents said that they preferred emails for continuing professional development event marketing and subsequent reminders.

Again, simple majorities may be misleading, as sizeable minorities still like a paper-based copy. The preference for email seems to decrease with the 'weightiness' of the issue at hand. For important documents, such as funding documents or policy circulars, the preference for hard copy versus email is a close call. For simple reminders about training, 80% prefer email.

Interestingly, only 1% of respondents felt that sector magazines/newspapers were the right medium to promote continuing professional development events. Traditionally this medium has been used extensively for this type of promotion by many sector communicators, including the Learning and Skills Network, but this strategy clearly needs to be reconsidered.

Considering the volume of communication in the sector, few of our respondents (1.3%) objected to receiving emails promoting continuing professional development events. (This may be a bias in the sample, considering that they responded to an email survey.)

Their patience, however, is not limitless. If an event is not recruiting so well, it is common practice to send email reminders. The survey shows that the more reminders sent, the more people object. At the first reminder, 5.5% of people would prefer not to receive it, by the second reminder the proportion jumps to 10.6%. These percentages may not seem like large numbers, but as communicators do we really want to annoy one in ten of our audience? Reminders can be effective – but if frequently re-sent, they become a burden.

Although the type of organisation didn't affect preferences, the role of the respondent did. Nearly half (43%) of all respondents who were lecturers/teachers/trainers preferred to receive news about new government initiatives via email. This ranking was lower than all other role groups who had a minimum 60% preference for receiving this information via email. But could this just be that lecturers/teachers/trainers don't have as much access to email?

Also, 13% of respondents who were lecturers/teachers/trainers felt that sector magazines/newspapers were an appropriate communication method for receiving information about new government initiatives. This was higher than respondents in most other roles, with only 5% of senior managers, 6% of managers and 6% of support staff agreeing. Is this because their organisations do not keep them informed?

Considering that less than 7% of all respondents didn't have a preference about the type of format for the listed communication messages, and on average less than 4% of all respondents didn't receive the listed messages, it is clear that there are strong preferences. These findings can be confidently used to help identify the most appropriate channel when distributing the listed information messages. It isn't foolproof, but it is better than a stab in the dark.

4.2.3 Please use this space if you would like to add additional comments.

Respondent feedback:

Websites are excellent but I like to have the contents drawn to my attention by an email announcement.

Three clear messages came through when respondents were given the opportunity to express their views on preferred formats in their own words:

- a general preference for email – with the proviso that it should be an introduction with links to a website or downloadable document for more detailed information

- although links in email are preferred they should not be over-used – too many links stop people reading

- there is also still a call for a personal approach with one-to-one chats highlighted as an option.

4.2.4 Government departments and agencies are increasingly using email as their preferred communication tool as it is fast, inexpensive and environmentally friendly. To what extent do you agree with the following statements…

Figure 8 shows that there is a very strong preference for email but still a strong demand for other communication channels. Overall, 72% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred to receive email in general. When compared with preferences for postal mailings 30% neither agreed nor disagreed that they preferred to receive information by post and 36% disagreed. The shift to email is clearly a move in the right direction but it seems the post still has some life left in it.

Figure 8 **Government departments and agencies are increasingly using email as their preferred communication tool as it is fast, inexpensive and environmentally friendly. To what extent do you agree with the following statements…**
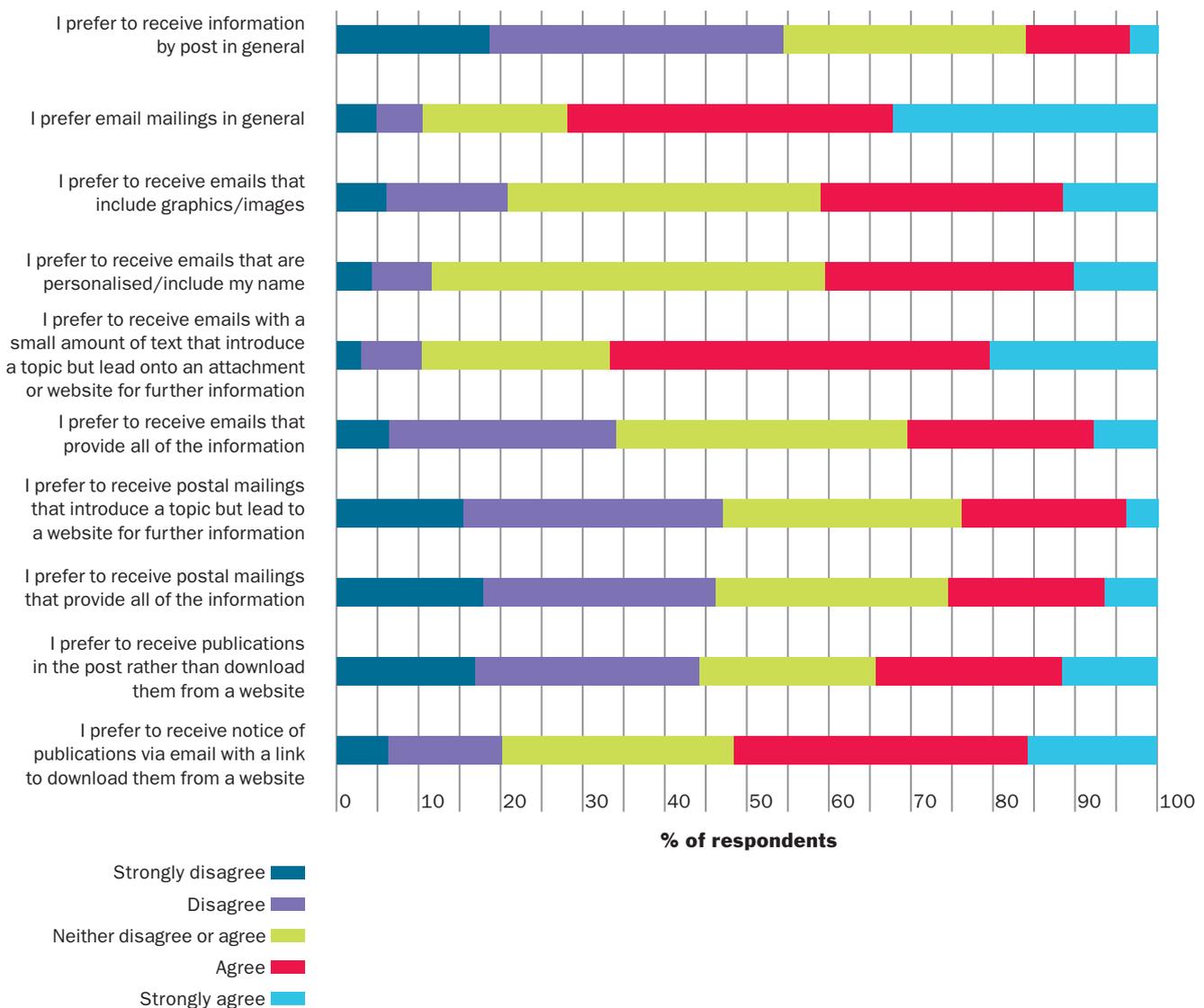
Interestingly, personalisation and graphics in emails are not very highly rated – the information really is more important than the look.

4.2.5 Recommendations for communicators

Email – it is a communicator's best friend. It's a quick, easy and effective way to distribute a message. However, this analysis does not suggest that other media can be ignored. Well, not just yet, anyway. The day may come when post boxes are put out of service but for the time being post is still very much an effective channel for communication with the sector.

The results also show that other forms of communication need to be fully considered for maximum impact. Don't just assume that a website is a sustainable channel without further promotion. Don't think that because a newspaper is sold, advertisements will be read. And don't overestimate the impact of graphics in an email. Harsh? Maybe – but it should merely be read as a reminder of some of the little points communicators can take for granted.

Key messages for communicators include:

- Email is an important medium in the sector but it is not universally accepted for all types of communication messages.

- Don't assume that having information on a website means it will automatically be read. There must be a complementary marketing campaign that actively directs people to the website.

- It is acceptable to send a reminder promoting a continuing professional development event but be careful not to bombard people, as they will become annoyed.

- Postal mailings are still a highly rated channel for distributing important information.

- Websites are the best medium to provide full details of news and event details.

- Advertising in sector press is not the best medium for promoting continuing professional development events.

- Text message marketing may be all the rage in some sectors, but not this one.

- Direct phone calls are not among the sector's preferred means of communication.

4.3 Communication frequency and timing

Imagine the average work day of a lecturer – class preparation, class presentation, marking of assessment pieces, class preparation for following day – and this is a light day. Also consider the average day of a contact at a work-based learning provider who delivers staff briefings for recruitment, lesson preparation, lesson delivery and evaluations. When do they have time to read about the latest government initiatives? When could they research training events and make a booking? When do they read the most up-to-date research about their profession? When indeed?

This section of the survey aims to assess how much information sector staff are receiving, how often and if they actually have time to read it.

4.3.1 LSN has received feedback that some practitioners feel overwhelmed by the volume of information that they receive. How would you rate the amount of external information you receive?

Confirming the idea of 'information overload', 60% of all respondents indicated that they received more information than they wanted and only 28% answered that they received the right amount. Figure 9 shows the preferences of all respondents based on role, where respondents could indicate their views on a 7-point scale.

Figure 9 LSN has received feedback that some practitioners feel overwhelmed by the volume of information that they receive. How would you rate the amount of external information you receive?
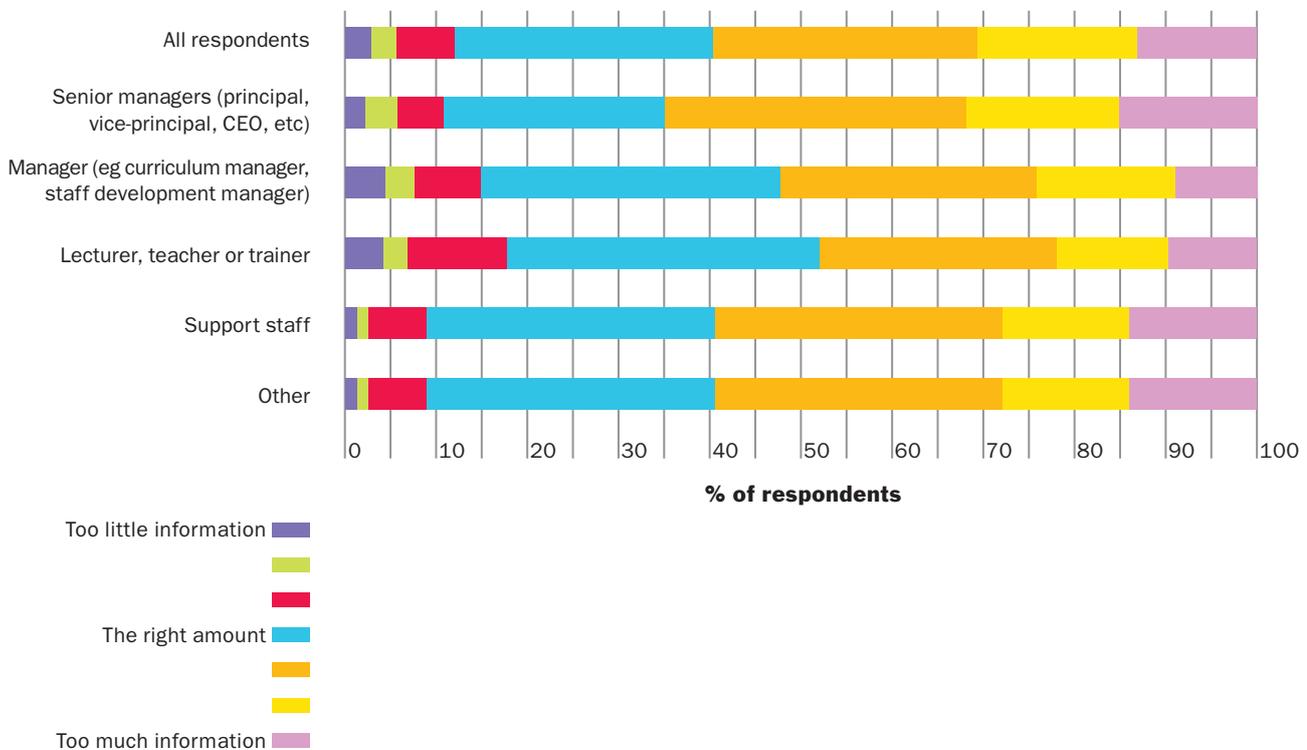
Nearly three-quarters (70%) of senior managers indicated that they received more information than they wanted, including 21% choosing the most extreme of the options on our 7-point scale. Aside from the 'other' grouping, the responses show that the sense of receiving too much information increases proportionately with seniority. However, all the groups surveyed said they received more information than they wanted.

4.3.2 On average, how many of the following external communication materials would you receive a week?

Figure 10 shows that on average a third of all respondents receive more than one piece of external material a week in each category, with some receiving a great deal more. This all adds up to a mountain of material hitting the desks and inboxes of our target audience.

Overall, emails were received more often than postal mailing, which supports respondent preferences shown in the section 4.2.2 of this report.

Figure 10 On average how many of the following external communication materials would you receive a week?

Legend:
- I don't receive this type of communication
- 7 or more per week
- 4–6 per week
- 1–3 per week
- Less than 1 per week
- Less than 1 per month
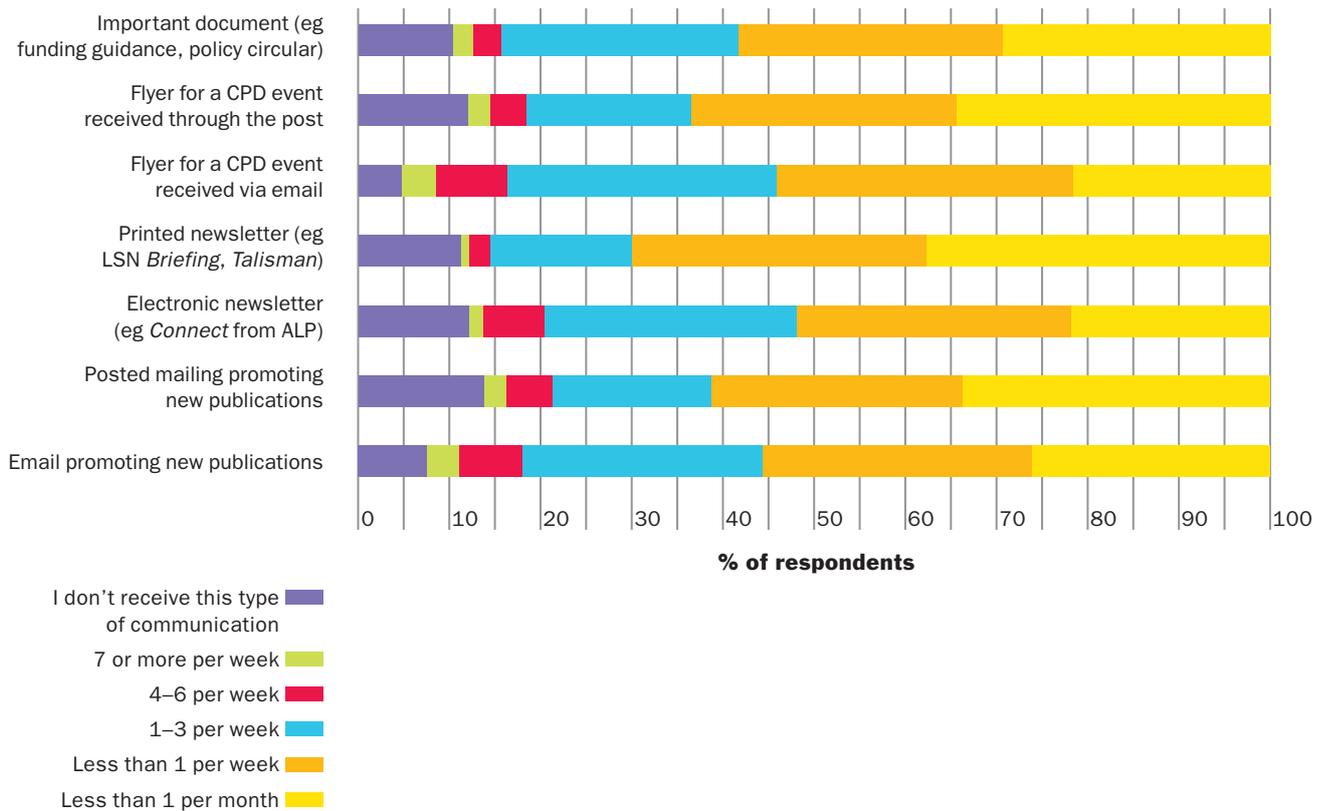
The role of the respondent is an important factor in the volume of information received: 21% of respondents who were senior managers received four to six emails per week for continuing professional development events. Across all other roles, 9% or less received this information that frequently. In fact, 40% of respondents who are support staff received this type of information less than once a month and 31% of respondents who are lecturers/teachers/trainers also received this information less than once a month.

Respondents who were senior managers also received emails promoting new publications more frequently than other staff, with 15% receiving this information seven or more times a week and 43% receiving between one and six a week. This compares with respondents who were lecturers/teachers/trainers, where less than 1% received this type of information seven or more times per week.

4.3.3 To what extent do you agree with the following statement – My workload prevents me from reading important external information and keeping in touch with what's going on in education and training?

The findings have already highlighted that staff in post-16 education and training are receiving more external information that they would like and jargon is affecting readability and understanding. But do they have time even to consider what we are sending them?

Figure 11 shows that 57% of all respondents felt their workload prevented them from reading important external information: 43% of all respondents agreed with this statement and 14% strongly agreed. This compares with only 17% of all respondents who disagree and 2% who strongly disagree.

Figure 11 To what extent do you agree with the following statement – My workload prevents me from reading important external information and keeping in touch with what's going on in education and training?

% of respondents
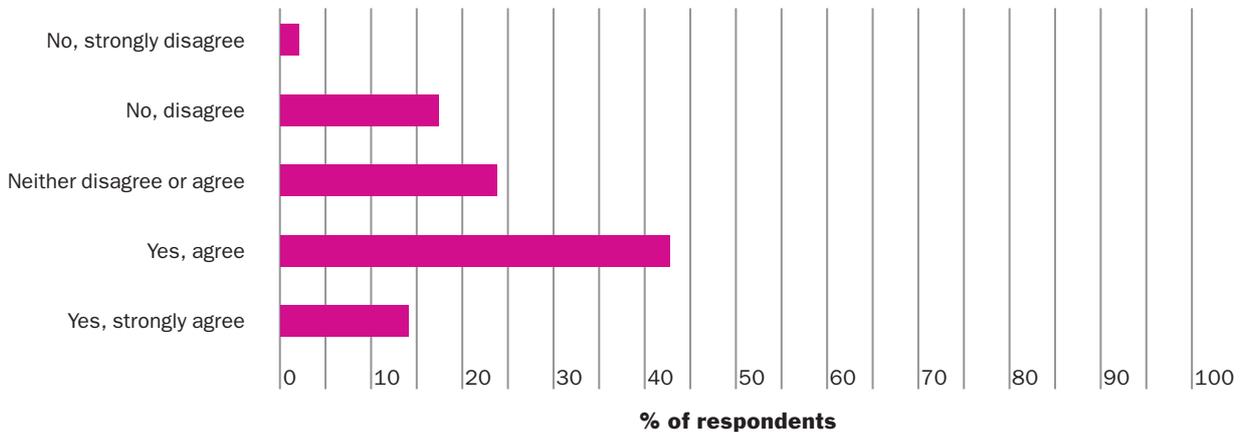
These are major barriers for communicators and it is critical that messages are carefully constructed if they are to have any hope of gaining attention.

4.3.4 How much time would you normally give for reading the following pieces of external communication materials?

If target audiences are busy, overloaded and distracted, how much time can they devote to the communications they receive? Figure 12 shows that most communication materials listed will be reviewed by respondents for three minutes or less.

In the case of an email promoting a continuing professional development event, you have less than one minute to capture their attention before 32% of your audience stop reading. A further 41% of your audience will stop reading between one and three minutes. That is almost three-quarters of the target audience lost within three minutes. Clearly, communications in this medium must be direct and to the point.

Figure 12 How much time would you normally give for reading the following pieces of external communication materials ?

Email promoting new publications

Posted mailing promoting new publications

Electronic newsletter (eg *Connect* from ALP)

Printed newsletter (eg LSN *Briefing*, *Talisman*)

Flyer for a CPD event received via email

Flyer for a CPD event received through the post

Important document (eg funding guidance, policy circular)

% of respondents

Under 1 min
1–3 mins
4–6 mins
7–9 mins
Longer if required
I would discard this type of information
It would depend on the communication
I don't receive this type of communication

Interestingly, the only type of communication that would be considered for longer if necessary is important documents, with 55% of all respondents selecting this answer followed by 26% of all respondents also giving extra time, if required, to printed newsletters.

Role also affected the amount of time given to reading a continuing professional development event flyer delivered through the post. Nearly half (42%) of respondents who are senior managers would allow less than one minute reading time for this information. This was very quick compared to an average of 29% of the remaining roles. The majority of respondents across all roles would allow between one and three minutes reading time for a continuing professional development event flyer delivered through the post. As seen in the previous questions, managers get so many of these messages that they only give them a short amount of time.

4.3.5 When you receive a piece of potentially useful external communication material who do you pass this information to…

Figure 13 shows that 48% of all respondents would pass material to a colleague in a similar role that they thought might make better use of the information. While this may be the obvious route for information distribution, there are some slightly different approaches when comparing organisation type.

Figure 13 When you receive a piece of potentially useful external communication material who do you pass this information to…
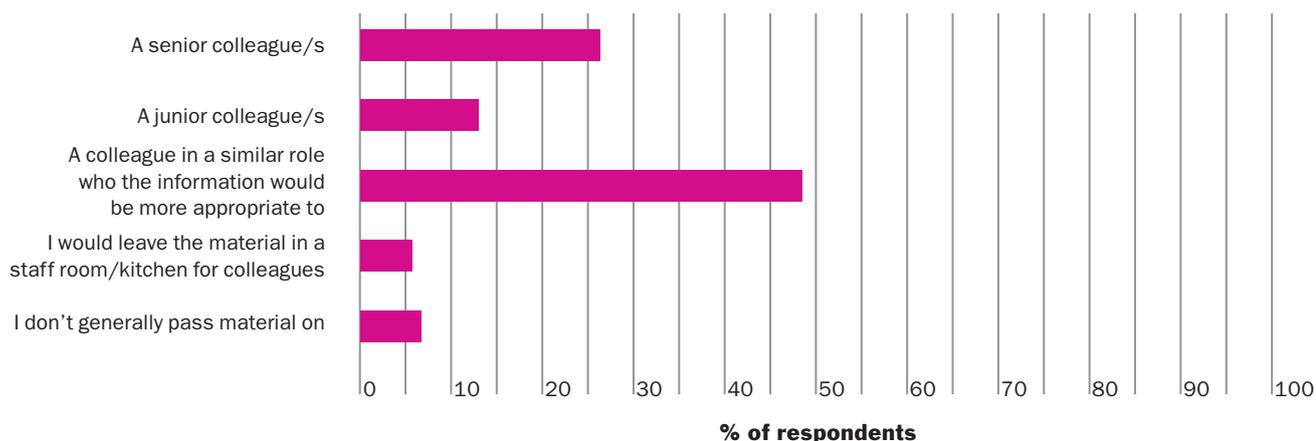
% of respondents

In offender learning organisations 28% of respondents working would leave communication materials in a staff room/kitchen for colleagues compared with an average of only 4% of respondents across all other organisation types. Over 32% of respondents from both work-based learning (WBL) and adult and community learning (ACL) organisations pass this material to a senior colleague, while across the remaining roles, on average only 23% of respondents would pass the information to senior colleagues.

4.3.6.a There is a large volume of continuing professional development (CPD) available from government departments and agencies. For example, when receiving information promoting a regional one-day CPD training event how long before the event date would you prefer to receive this information for you to arrange/confirm your attendance?

A key objective for government departments and agencies is to promote and deliver training events about education initiatives and quality improvement. The Learning and Skills Network has often received feedback that the timing between promotion and event date is to short and potential delegates don't have enough notice to arrange attendance. At the Learning and Skills Network, we have a 'rule of thumb' that, if possible, we aim to start promoting an event 12 weeks before the event date – let's put it to the test.

Figure 14 shows that 54% of all respondents prefer seven or more weeks' notice of a continuing professional development event. If the event promotion is received less than seven weeks before the event it will be considered by less than half of the target audience. If the timing is extended to 10–12 weeks notice before the event date, 95% of all respondents will feel that this is a suitable timeframe in which to arrange attendance. This appears to confirm LSN's rule of thumb.

Figure 14 **There is a large volume of CPD available from government departments and agencies. For example, when receiving information promoting a regional one-day CPD training event how long before the event date would you prefer to receive this information for you to arrange/confirm your attendance?**

% of respondents
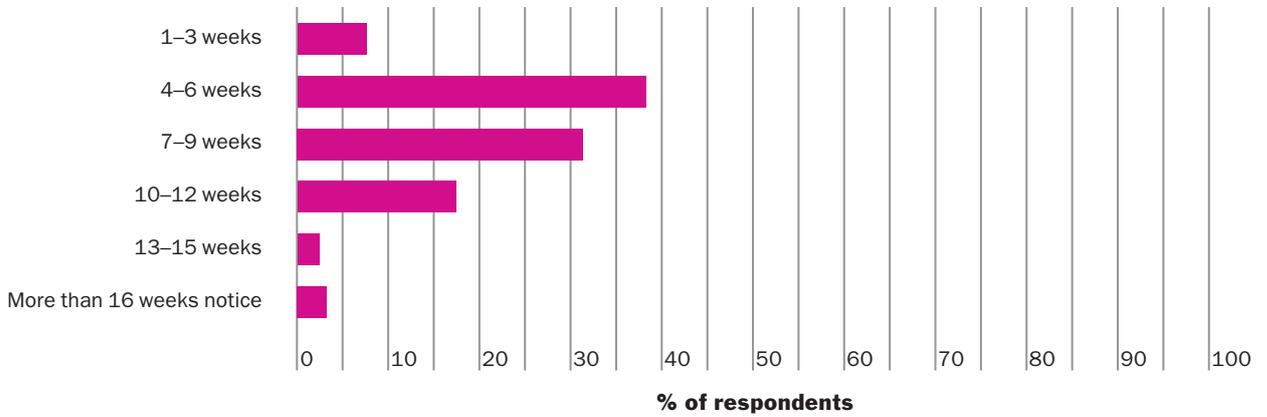
4.3.6.b **There is a large volume of continuing professional development (CPD) available from government departments and agencies. For example, when receiving information promoting a regional one-day CPD training event, how long before the event date would be your absolute minimum time to receive this information for you to arrange/confirm your attendance?**

Unfortunately there are many factors that restrict the timely distribution of communication messages and can hamper recruitment. The next question aimed to find the absolute minimum timescale to effectively promote events.

Figure 15 shows that if an event was promoted a minimum six weeks before an event date it would be realistically considered by 89% of respondents. If an event is promoted less than four week in advance, up to 61% of your target audience simply won't be able to attend. This will seriously restrict the reach and impact of your event.

Figure 15 **There is a large volume of CPD available from government departments and agencies. For example, when receiving information promoting a regional one-day CPD training event, how long before the event date would be your absolute minimum time to receive this information for you to arrange/confirm your attendance?**

% of respondents
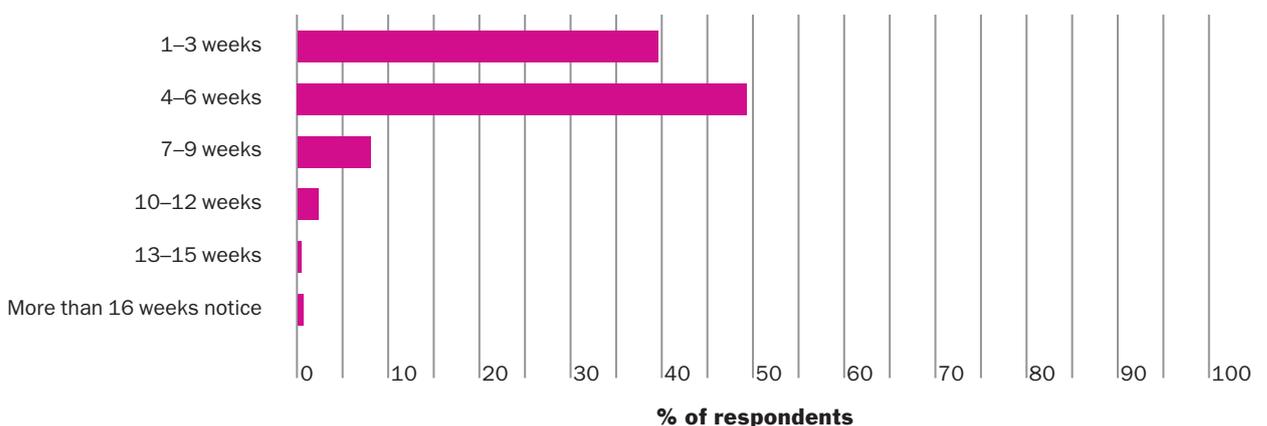
4.3.7 Recommendations for communicators

The findings of this section really bring into perspective just how critical it is that communication messages to this audience are spot on if they are to have any chance of moving from the desk or inbox to eye level.

More than half the respondents indicated that their workload prevents them from keeping up to date. Over half the respondents indicated they receive more information than they would like. And if materials do get read most of the materials will be in the bin after just three minutes. Although this is disappointing for communicators who work hard to create the materials, it's not surprising considering just how much information respondents receive.

At least communicators can take some encouragement from these findings knowing that their communication materials are often passed to other colleagues. All that hard work doesn't go completely unnoticed.

This leads to some clear recommendations for communications practice.

1. Communication channels to this market are noisy and cluttered – particularly where managers are concerned. We can't give the audience more time to read our messages so we have to work harder to reach them through clear, relevant and high-quality information. What are you doing to make sure your messages cut through the clutter and stand out?

2. All departments and agencies must actively manage the number and frequency of their messages. What value will your communication add to your target audience? Are you managing timings to prevent your contacts being bombarded?

3. The workload of the target audience actively stops them from reading external information. Would your communications pass a 'less than one minute' test to grab their attention?

4. Don't forget how communication materials are used. Often it is not only the original recipient who reads the messages so the tone and language should be suitable for a variety of people. It's also worth considering how we can use and encourage this kind of viral marketing opportunity.

5. The '12-week rule' is an appropriate courtesy to 95% of your target audience when promoting an event. Six weeks out, most people can still attend if pushed, but four weeks before, more than half simply can't make it.

4.4 Language and tone

Within the sector there has been endless discussion about the meaning of words, their appropriateness and use. This survey was a perfect opportunity to get an answer to some of the nagging concerns of communicators when writing promotional messages. And why stop there? The tone of the messages has also been the target of many discussions. The survey hoped to find some definitive conclusions. Was it successful? See for yourself…

4.4.1 Our sector (containing organisations funded by the Learning and Skills Council, LSC) has been described in many different ways. What title do you think best describes the 'sector' you work in?

Our sector (LSC-funded provision) has been called a number of different things over the years – the term 'the FE system' has been popular of late. We took the opportunity to ask providers what sector they thought they worked in. A third (33%) felt that the title 'further education' best describes the sector they worked in; 20% preferred 'learning and skills sector' and 17% of respondents preferred 'post-16 education and training'. If it were a simple vote, the result would be clear – 'further education sector' wins it. The real issues come to the fore when the results are broken down by organisation as shown in Figure 16.

Figure 16 Our sector (containing organisations funded by the LSC) has been described in many different ways. What title do you think best describes the 'sector' you work in?

Legend:
- Other
- I don't mind/I have no preference
- TVET – Technical Vocational Education and Training
- Post-16 education and training
- Post-14 education and training
- Learning and Skills sector
- Further education system
- Further education sector
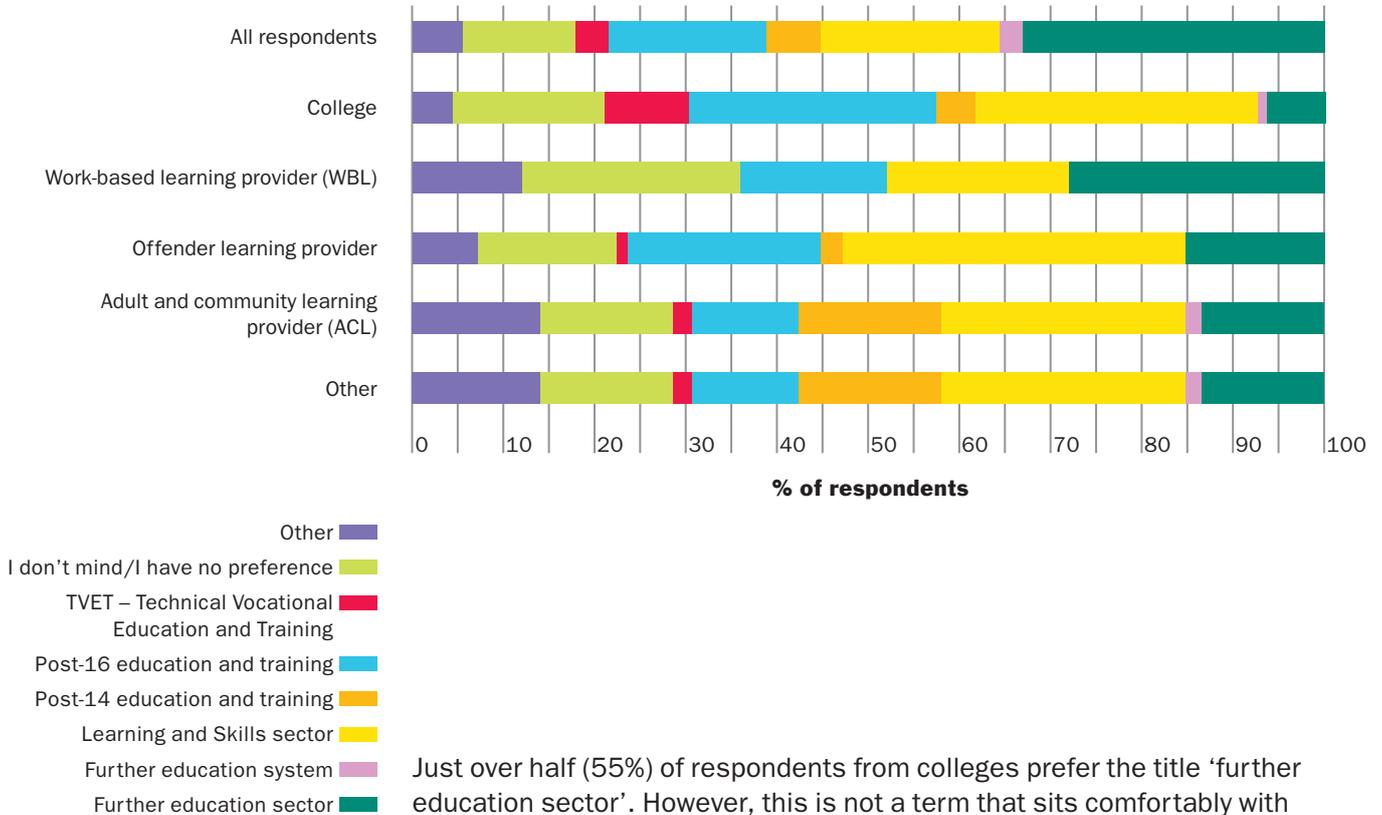
Just over half (55%) of respondents from colleges prefer the title 'further education sector'. However, this is not a term that sits comfortably with work-based learning providers and adult and community learning providers – of whom just 6% and 15% respectively think they work in a sector with this title. The current in vogue title 'further education system' also failed to win convincingly. Terms beginning with 'further education' may be convenient catch-alls but they disenfranchise non-college providers.

The title 'learning and skills sector' ranked highly with respondents from work-based learning and adult and community learning organisations, with 31% and 38% of respondents respectively and 9% of college respondents and 20% of offender learning respondents also feeling this was an acceptable title.

The title 'post-16 education and training' also ranked highly across most organisation types. 27% of respondents from work-based learning organisations chose this title, as did 21% of respondents from adult and community learning organisations, 14% of respondents from colleges and 16% of respondents from offender learning providers. It may be that 'post-16 education and training provider' is the least-worst option, which is a shame – it doesn't read very well and is probably hopeless as a term for the general public so it may be sector-specific jargon. But based on these findings this report has used the title 'post-16 education and training' as it is the most inclusive across all organisations overall.

Respondents also had the opportunity to provide alternative options and they included adult education, adult learning and alternative curriculum.

4.4.2 Which term do you think best describes people who teach learners in our sector?

When the highest-ranking preference with 23% of responses was for the option 'I don't mind/have no preference' we know we have been wasting our time on this debate. Figure 17 shows that there are mixed preferences toward a common title for this role category. It is clear that the title practitioner is least favourable with only 10% of all respondents preferring it.

Figure 17 Which term do you think best describes people who teach learners in our sector?

Teacher — 19%
Trainer — 18%
Practitioner — 10%
Lecturer — 22%
I don't mind/I have no preference — 23%
Other — 8%
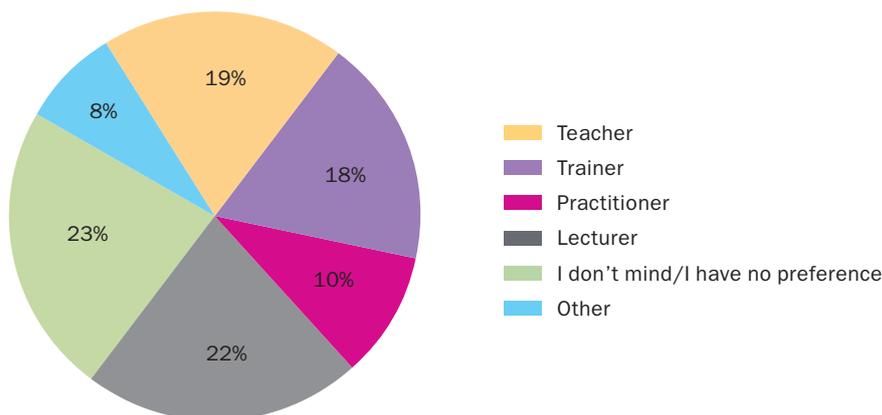
When the responses were compared with organisation type, however, they were consistent with the findings above on the whole: 48% of respondents from work-based learning (WBL) providers confirmed that their preferred title is trainer.

Respondents also had the opportunity to suggest other titles, and came up with tutor, assessor, mentor, instructor, facilitator and trainer. One respondent thought 'doormat' was appropriate but with any luck this is a minority preference as it certainly doesn't reflect the important and valued role we are describing. Other feedback confirmed that title depends largely on the content being presented and the audience. Maybe the debate will continue after all?

4.4.3 There is often debate about what to call professional practice that really works. Would you describe this as…

From time to time, we have encountered quite fierce debate about what to call professional practice that really works – is it good practice? Is it best practice? What about excellent practice? Says who? We aimed to settle this debate once and for all. There are two front-runners here. Figure 18 shows that 48% of all respondents prefer the term best practice, while 33% of all respondents prefer the term good practice. The remaining options were rated very low in comparison. If we are prepared to take a simple majority view, that answers that one – job done.

Figure 18 There is often debate about what to call professional practice that really works. Would you describe this as…

- Best practice
- Good practice
- Best demonstrated practice
- Promising practice
- I don't mind/I have no preference
- Excellent practice
- Other
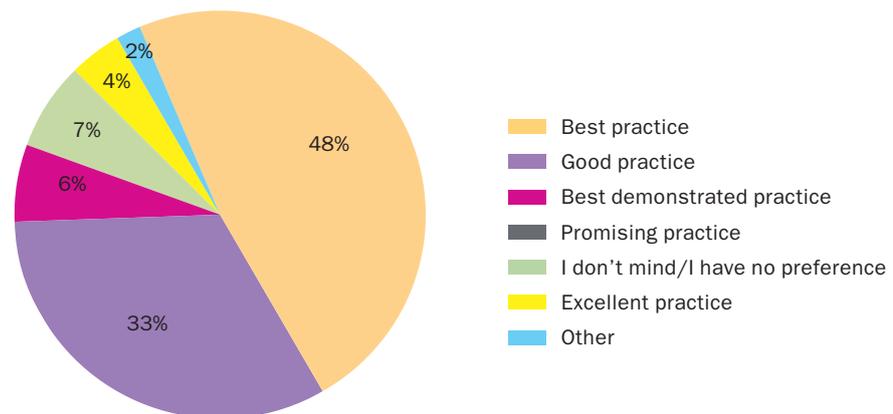
Respondents also had the opportunity to provide alternative options, which included effective practice, evidence based practice and professional practice.

4.4.4 Communications from government departments and agencies are often drafted in a particular tone, but does this work for you? Please indicate your preference of the following tones…

We included five questions about tone – each asking respondents to pick a tone between two absolutes on a five-point scale. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most respondents wanted an even balance between the extremes. However, there are two issues to consider:

- where would your current communications lie? Are they in line with what the audience wants?

- is there a sizeable minority one way or the other, that would suggest which side to err on?

Informal – formal

Compared with most communications across the commercial and not-for-profit sectors, materials for this sector traditionally use a more formal approach. However, figure 19 shows that 52% of all respondents prefer an even balance of formality and informality in communication materials. If erring on the side of caution, a slight majority of the remainder (29% v. 19%) of all respondents indicated that they prefer the tone of communications to be formal on the whole – but there is obviously room to tone down the stuffiness.

Figure 19 Informal – formal
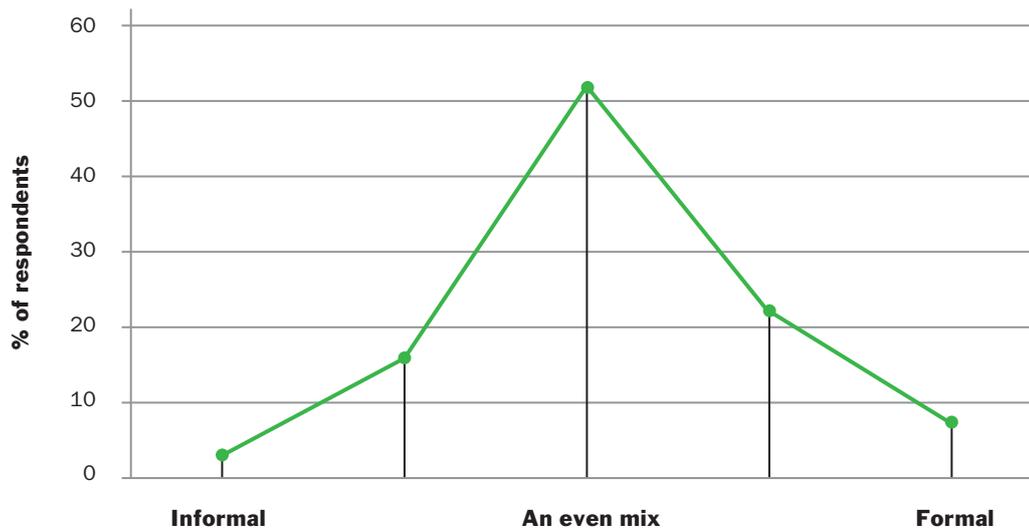
4.4.5 Summary/Introduction – detailed

Figure 20 shows that 42% of all respondents prefer an even balance of introductory information and detail in communication materials; 35% prefer tone to be summary/introductory tone on the whole; while 23% of all respondents prefer detail on the whole.

This supports the findings in section 4.2.4 where 67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred emails that introduced a topic and then linked to further detail. When compared to postal mailings 24% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred mailings that introduced a topic and had links to further detail. It is clear that the type of communication will directly influence the content and an even balance between detailed and summary/introduction information should be used.

Figure 20 Summary/Introduction – detailed
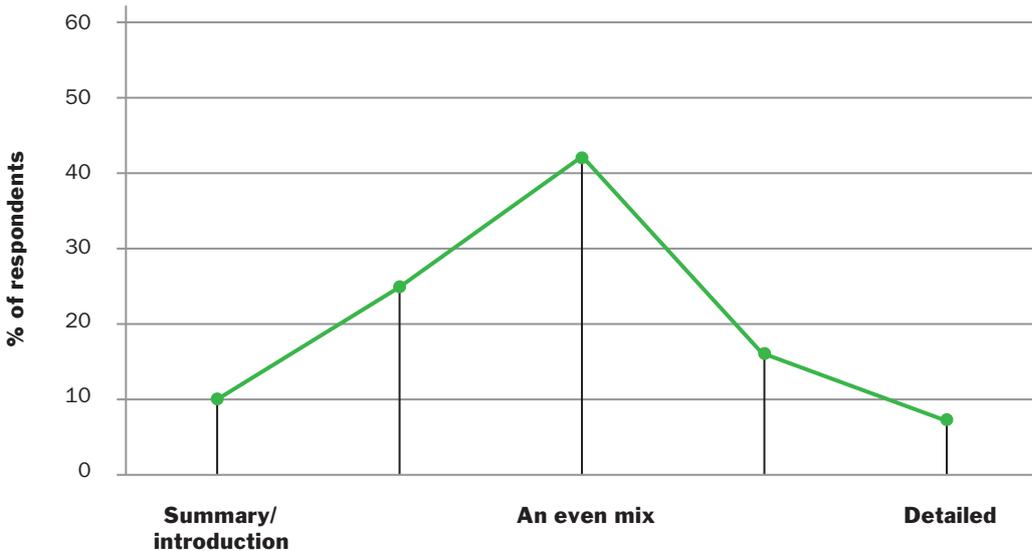
4.4.6 Use of humour – no use of humour

Humour within current communications in our sector is rare but Figure 21 shows that 37% of all respondents prefer a sensible use of humour within communication materials; a further 29% of all respondents erred on the side of humour; 34% of all respondents prefer no use of humour on the whole and 15% of all respondents prefer no use of humour at all.

Clearly, using humour is risky and must be appropriate – but the findings of this survey should give us permission to try from time to time.

Figure 21 Use of humour – no use of humour
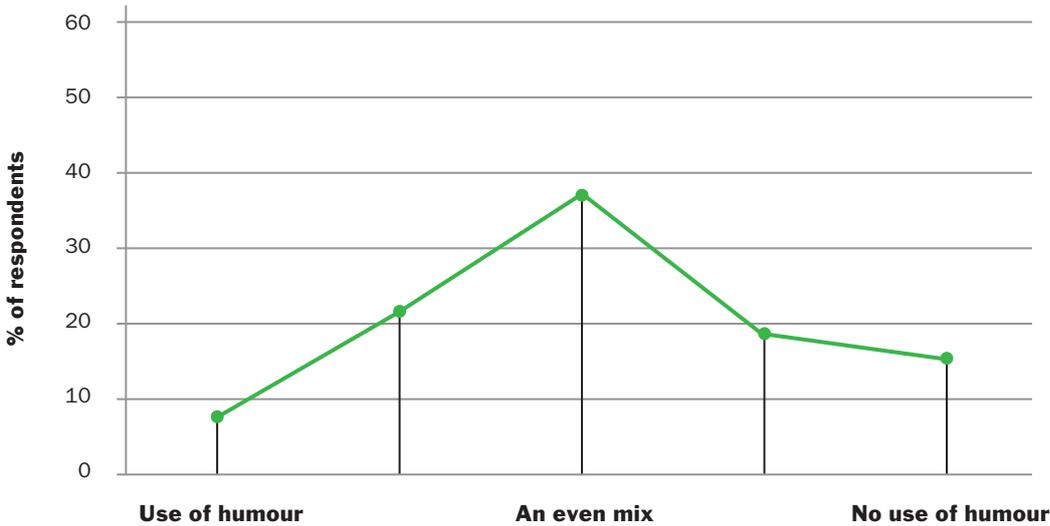
4.4.7 Speaking optimistically – recognising challenges

Providers in the sector are facing very real challenges and it is clear from the findings shown in Figure 22 that these need to be recognised more within communication messages. Currently, objections, challenges and dissenting opinions are mainly glossed over. Nearly half (43%) of all respondents prefer an even balance of optimism and recognising challenges within communication materials. A further 40% of all respondents prefer a tone that recognises challenges on the whole while only 19% of all respondents prefer an optimistic tone. The messages must be 'real' to the audience for the messages to be effective and actioned.

Figure 22 Speaking optimistically - recognising challenges
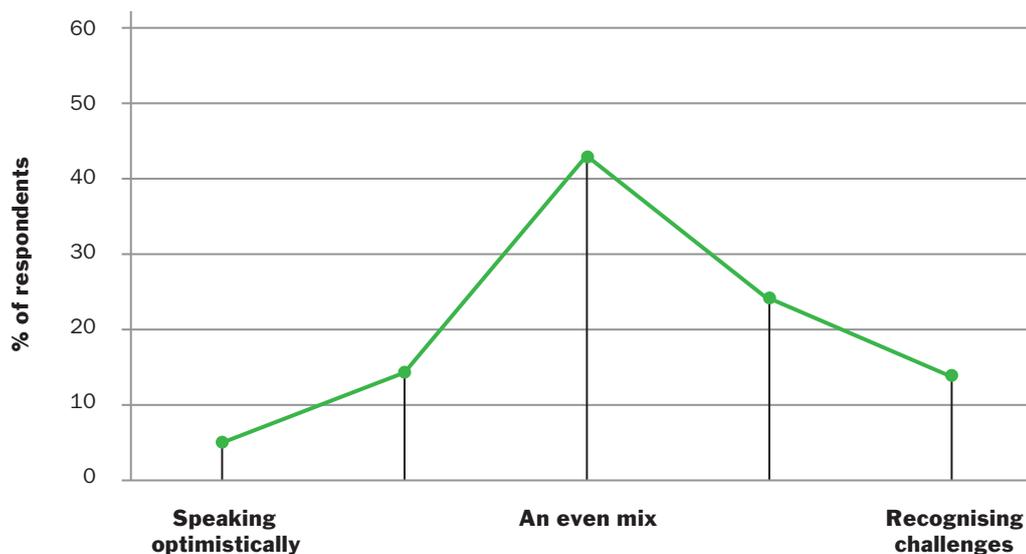
4.4.8 Learner focused – policy focused

Respondent feedback:

It is a pity that there is a difference between learner and policy focused, but there is.

With so many new initiatives being promoted it isn't surprising that the focus has moved toward policy rather than the heart of the sector – the learners. Figure 23 suggests this trend should be reversed – 47% of respondents prefer the focus to be on the learner within communication materials on the whole and 20% of respondents prefer a sole focus on the learner. A further 42% of all respondents prefer an even balance between learner focus and policy focus within communication materials which would be a happy compromise. With only 12% of all respondents preferring a focus on policy on the whole, there is definitely a need for change.

Figure 23 Learner focused – policy focused
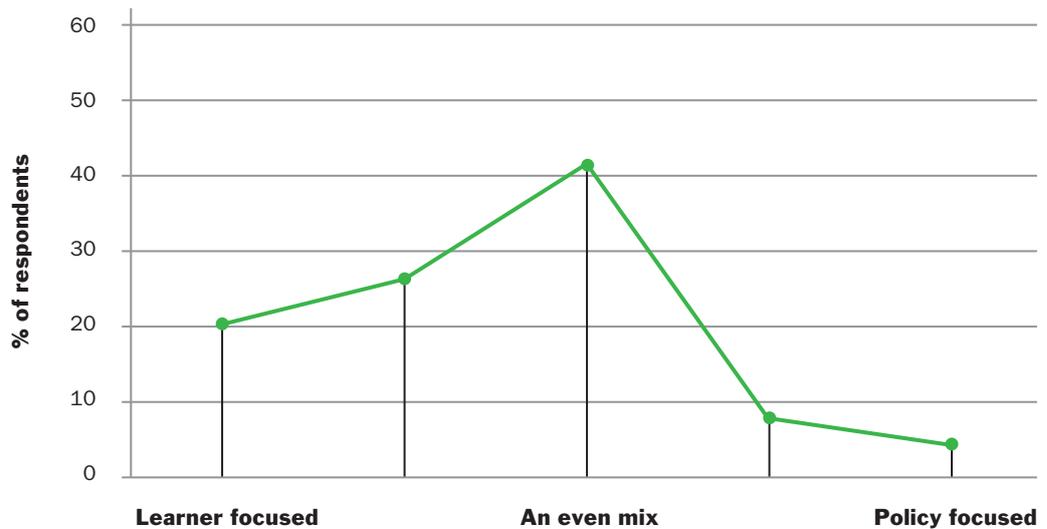
4.4.9 Please use this space if you would like to add additional comments:

Respondents also had the opportunity to provide general comments about the tone of communication messages which included:

- 'Obviously depends on the intended audience, but there is a tendency to overlook problems'
- 'I expect it to be clear and objective. Over-use of humour, optimism or any other specific tone becomes an annoyance unless you agree'
- '… informed and clear about what we know about learning'
- 'Just use English – plain understandable English – it's not difficult ... or is it?'
- 'Readability and intelligibility are the keys.'
- 'Needs to get to the point accurately and without waffle.'
- 'Simple, snappy language would be helpful.'

4.4.10 Recommendations for communicators

This section focused on answers to key questions that have been debated by sector communicators for some time. We have a better idea about what to call the sector; we know that there are mixed preferences about what to call staff who teach students; and we finally know that both the terms best practice and good practice are accepted.

Further recommendations include:

1. Messages must be more focused on the needs of the reader. We need to take the time to fully understand exactly what the needs of our audience are – assumptions are not an option.

2. Lighten up – when creating messages there is an opportunity to experiment with a less formal approach.

3. We have permission to consider cautiously introducing some humour – with the emphasis on 'cautiously' here.

4. The focus must come back to learners rather than policies. The sector wouldn't exist without learners and our messages should reflect that too.

5 | Conclusions

This report has highlighted some weighty challenges for sector communicators. It isn't intended to point the finger, but rather highlight areas for improvement and it applies just as much to the Learning and Skills Network as anyone else.

Jargon is over-used and unwelcome

Double Dutch, talking gobbledegook, or using a secret language – whatever you want to call it we have been tried and convicted by the sector of a lack of plain English and we must do better. Communication messages currently distributed for government departments and agencies are riddled with unnecessary and unwanted jargon. Ruthless? Yes, a little – but if it isn't fixed the messages might as well not be sent. Jargon is a direct and very clear barrier to readability and understanding and without plain English the message is pretty much useless.

And we can't hide behind acronyms either. They are just a jumble of letters and not shorthand. Your audience will thank you for the full spelling even if it does take up more space on the page.

Email is not the only answer

Email is a sustainable alternative to postal mailings and it is hailed as the strongest marketing tool for communicators. But while email is preferred by most respondents it isn't suitable for everything – and certainly not by everyone. Communicators must be careful not to jump on the email bandwagon at the expense of their audience's needs. Use a mix of communication channels and don't underestimate the power of post – particularly for important information.

Too much information, too little time

People working in this sector are bombarded with information every week; this, coupled with their heavy workloads, means they struggle to keep up with developments. Sector communicators must do more to increase the relevance and improve the timing of their communications. We need to spend more time on getting the messages right so that they have the most impact and cut through.

Not all of the answers, but valuable insight….

Debates over what things are called will continue – such is the nature of our sector. But the research has shown that people working within the sector prefer the terms best or good practice for effective work. Any other variant rated minimally and these were the two clear winners.

A title for the sector was a little trickier as it depended fundamentally on what sort of organisation you came from. The title further education sector is most appropriate when communicating with colleges but will alienate all other provider types. The most inclusive terms were learning and skills sector or post-16 education and training sector; alternatively, there is a major job to do gaining the buy-in of non-college providers for a term that works outside the sector.

As far as the title for staff who teach is concerned, it seems that most titles are accepted for this role as long as they are consistently used.

Lighten up, but speak about the world as seen by the audience

In general the sector prefers a balanced tone in communications but the responses show openness to some creative flexibility. Survey respondents gave communicators permission to be a little less formal, to add a little humour, though with caution, and to shift the focus of messages from policy to learners. This may be controversial, but it is fully acceptable – be brave but tread carefully.

Survey questions

Introduction

Useful and interesting or junk mail and jargon? – communications from government departments and agencies

Many staff in post-16 education and training receive information from government departments or agencies – or organisations acting on their behalf. This could be anything from funding guidance to promotional flyers for staff development events; from policy information to stakeholder newsletters. At LSN, we'd like to find out your views on these communications – whether they are easy to understand, or too full of jargon; whether they are in the right formats for you, or not convenient to access; whether you are receiving too many of them, or too few.

To find this out, we have prepared a simple survey on your communication loves and hates. We'll use the information you provide in two ways. First, it will help us improve the quality and timing of what LSN sends to the sector. Second, we'll prepare a report of the results and send copies to all of the agencies and departments that work in our sector and communicate with you. The survey should take about 10 minutes or so to complete.

Please note that all responses are anonymous.

Many thanks in advance for your feedback.

Jargon in education and training

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the language used in the education and training sector?

1. **To what extent do you think the use of inappropriate jargon or a lack of plain English is commonplace in the communications you receive?**

   ☐ Very common
   ☐ Common
   ☐ Neither common nor uncommon
   ☐ Uncommon
   ☐ Very uncommon

   Rating scale

2. **Does jargon in policy updates, funding guidance, newsletters or promotional flyers ever:**

2.a Prevent you from reading important external information?

2.b Prevent you from fully understanding important external information?

   ☐ Always
   ☐ Frequently
   ☐ Sometimes
   ☐ Never
   ☐ I find the documents I receive are usually clear and easy to read

   Tick box across top for both sub questions

3. Education and training communications frequently use words that an outsider would struggle with – but are they jargon? How do you rank the following commonly used words and phrases:

3.a Action research

3.b Agenda (the skills agenda)

3.c Blended learning

3.d Delivery (delivery of learning)

3.e Demand-led

3.f E-learning

3.g E-maturity

3.h Embedding

3.i Employability

3.j Engagement

3.k Evidence-based policy

3.l Framework

3.m Line of learning

3.n M-learning

3.o NEETs – not in employment, education or training

3.p Pedagogy

3.q Personalisation

3.r Responsive (-ness)

3.s Safeguard (-ing)

3.t Scaffolding learning

3.u Stakeholder

3.v VLE – virtual learning environment

Jargon

Mild jargon

No opinion

Professionally acceptable to the sector

Accepted as plain English

4. Which other jargon words or phrases really make you mad?

Communication methods

Glossy flyers, newspapers, emails or letters – what captures your eye?

5. How do you generally keep informed about what's happening in education and training? Please select all that apply.

5.1 Important document (eg funding guidance, policy circular, consultation document)

5.2 Flyer for a CPD event received through the post

5.3 Flyer for a CPD event received via email

5.4 Printed newsletter (eg LSN *Briefing*, *Talisman*)

5.5 Electronic newsletter (eg *Connect* from ALP)

5.6 Posted mailing promoting new publications

5.7 Email promoting new publications

5.8 None of the above

5.9 Other

Tick box – can select multiple

6. What format of communication do you prefer to receive from government departments and agencies for the following types of information? Please select all that apply.

6.a News about government initiatives

6.b New research

6.c New teaching and learning resources

6.d General FE news

6.e Good practice case studies

6.f CPD event marketing (eg free training, workshops and networks)

6.g First reminder about a CPD event

6.h Second reminder about a CPD event

6.i An important document (eg funding guidance, policy circular, consultation document)

6.j First reminder for an important document

6.k Second reminder for an important document

Email

Post/hard copy

Websites

Sector magazines/newspapers

Text message

Phone call

I don't have a preference

I prefer not to receive this type of information

7. Please use this space if you would like to add additional comments:

> (blank comment box)

8. Government departments and agencies are increasingly using email as their preferred communication tool as it is fast, inexpensive and environmentally friendly. To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

8.a I prefer to receive information by post in general

8.b I prefer email mailings in general

8.c I prefer to receive emails that include graphics/images

8.d I prefer to receive emails that are personalised/include my name

8.e I prefer to receive emails with a small amount of text that introduce a topic but lead onto an attachment or website for further information

8.f I prefer to receive emails that provide all of the information

8.g I prefer to receive postal mailings that introduce a topic but lead to a website for further information

8.h I prefer to receive postal mailings that provide all of the information

8.i I prefer to receive publications in the post rather than download them from a website

8.j I prefer to receive notice of publications via email with a link to download them from a website

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neither disagree or agree

Agree

Strongly agree

Communication frequency and timing

Does visiting your mailbox or opening your email fill you with dread because you know there will be a new pile of information waiting for you to read? How much is too much?

9. LSN has received feedback that some practitioners feel overwhelmed by the volume of information that they receive. How would you rate the amount of external information you receive?

Seven-point scale from

☐   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

Too much information   The right amount   Too little information

10. On average how many of the following external communication materials would you receive a week?

10.a Important document (eg funding guidance, policy circular)

10.b Flyer for a CPD event received through the post

10.c Flyer for a CPD event received via email

10.d Printed newsletter (eg LSN *Briefing*, *Talisman*)

10.e Electronic newsletter (eg *Connect* from ALP)

10.f Posted mailing promoting new publications

10.g Email promoting new publications

Less than 1 per month

Less than 1 per week

1–3 per week

4–6 per week

7 or more per week

I don't receive this type of communication

11. To what extent do you agree with the following statement - My workload prevents me from reading important external information and keeping in touch with what's going on in education and training?

☐ No, strongly disagree

☐ No, disagree

☐ Neither disagree or agree

☐ Yes, agree

☐ Yes, strongly agree

Tick box

12. How much time would you normally give for reading the following pieces of external communication materials?

12.a Important document (eg funding guidance, policy circular)

12.b Flyer for a CPD event received through the post

12.c Flyer for a CPD event received via email

12.d Printed newsletter (eg LSN *Briefing*, *Talisman*)

12.e Electronic newsletter (eg *Connect* from ALP)

12.f Posted mailing promoting new publications

12.g Email promoting new publications

Under 1 min

1–3 mins

4–6 mins

7–9 mins

Longer if required

I would discard this type of information

It would depend on the communication

I don't receive this type of communication

13. When you receive a piece of potentially useful external communication material do you pass this information to:

☐ A senior colleague/s

☐ A junior colleague/s

☐ A colleague in a similar role who the information would be more appropriate to

☐ I would leave the material in a staff room/kitchen for colleagues

☐ I don't generally pass material on

Tick box

14. There is a large volume of CPD available from government departments and agencies. For example, when receiving information promoting a regional one-day CPD training event how long before the event date would:

14.a You prefer to receive this information for you to arrange/confirm your attendance?

14.b Be your absolute minimum time to receive this information for you to arrange/confirm your attendance?

☐ 1–3 weeks

☐ 4–6 weeks

☐ 7–9 weeks

☐ 10–12 weeks

☐ 13–15 weeks

☐ More than 16 weeks notice

Tick box across top for both sub questions

Language

We've seen and heard plenty of arguments about what things should be called. Let's end the debate…

15. Our sector (containing organisations funded by the LSC) has been described in many different ways. What title do you think best describes the 'sector' you work in?

☐ Post-16 education and training sector

☐ Post-16 education and training system

☐ Learning and Skills sector

☐ Post-14 education and training

☐ Post-16 education and training

☐ TVET – Technical Vocational Education and Training (an international definition)

☐ I don't mind/I have no preference

15.a Other

```



```

Tick box

16. Which term do you think best describes people who teach learners in our sector?

☐ Teacher

☐ Trainer

☐ Practitioner

☐ Lecturer

☐ I don't mind/I have no preference

16.a Other

```



```

Tick box

17. **There is often debate about what to call professional practice that really works. Would you describe this as:**

☐ Best practice

☐ Good practice

☐ Best demonstrated practice

☐ Promising practice

☐ I don't mind/I have no preference

☐ Excellent practice

17.a Other

Tick box

Communication from government departments and agencies are often drafted in a particular tone, but does this work for you? Please indicate your preference of the following tones:

18. **Informal – Formal**

19. **Summary/Introduction – Detailed**

20. **Use of humour – No use of humour**

21. **Speaking optimistically – Recognising challenges**

22. **Learner focused – Policy focused**

For questions 18–22 please rank your preference of the following tones by choosing the scale position you identify with the most, with the middle option being an even balance.

23. **Please use this space if you would like to add additional comments:**

About you

Don't be one of the crowd – mark your individuality.

24. Role

24.1 Senior managers (eg principal, vice-principal, CEO, managing director)

24.2 Manager (eg curriculum manager, staff development manager)

24.3 Lecturer, teacher or trainer

24.4 Support staff

24.5 Other

24.a

Drop down list

25. What type of organisation do you work for? (select one only)

25.1 College

25.2 Work-based learning provider (WBL)

25.3 Adult and community learning provider (ACL)

25.4 Offender learning provider

25.5 Other

25.a

Drop down list

26. Sex

26.1 Male

26.2 Female

Drop down list

27. Age

27.1 Under 30

27.2 31–44 years

27.3 45–59 years

27.4 60+ years

Drop down list

Appendix 2 Sample breakdown

Role

Senior managers (eg principal, vice-principal, CEO, managing director)	123	12.5%
Manager (eg curriculum manager, staff development manager)	361	36.7%
Lecturer, teacher or trainer	345	35.1%
Support staff	74	7.5%
Other	81	8.2%

Organisation

College	492	49.8%
Work-based learning provider (WBL)	204	20.7%
Offender learning provider	25	2.5%
Adult and community learning provider (ACL)	86	8.7%
Other	180	18.2%

Sex

Male	362	36.9%
Female	618	63.1%

Age

Under 30	30	3.0%
31–44 years	216	22.0%
45–59 years	632	64.2%
60+ years	106	10.8%

Appendix 3 Survey responses summary

Jargon in education and training

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the language used in the education and training sector?

1. To what extent do you think the use of inappropriate jargon or a lack of plain English is commonplace in the communications you receive?

	Frequency	Percentage
Very common	218	21.9
Common	530	53.3
Neither common nor uncommon	180	18.1
Uncommon	56	5.6
Very uncommon	9	0.9
Total	993	99.9
Missing	1	0.1
Total	994	100.0

Does jargon in policy updates, funding guidance, newsletters or promotional flyers ever:

2.a Prevent you from reading important external information?

	Always		Frequently		Sometimes		Never		I find the documents I receive are usually clear and easy to read	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Prevent you from reading important external information? (Please select one option)	20	2.0	252	25.6	537	54.6	120	12.2	55	5.6

2.b Prevent you from fully understanding important external information?

	Always		Frequently		Sometimes		Never		I find the documents I receive are usually clear and easy to read	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Prevent you from fully understanding important external information? (Please select one option)	22	2.2	245	25.0	576	58.7	90	9.2	48	4.9

3. Education and training communications frequently use words that an outsider would struggle with – but are they jargon? How do you rank the following commonly used words and phrases:

	Jargon		Mild jargon		Professionally acceptable to the sector		Accepted as plain English		I don't know what this word/ phrase means	
Action research	149	15.1%	289	29.4%	411	41.8%	83	8.4%	52	5.3%
Agenda (the skills agenda)	73	7.4%	213	21.6%	461	46.8%	235	23.9%	3	0.3%
Blended learning	252	25.5%	249	25.2%	393	39.7%	31	3.1%	64	6.5%
Delivery (delivery of learning)	33	3.4%	106	10.8%	575	58.4%	269	27.3%	2	0.2%
Demand-led	113	11.5%	223	22.6%	454	46.0%	192	19.5%	4	0.4%
e-learning	66	6.7%	167	17.0%	563	57.3%	180	18.3%	6	0.6%
e-maturity	288	29.3%	305	31.1%	161	16.4%	22	2.2%	206	21.0%
Embedding	104	10.6%	208	21.1%	512	52.0%	155	15.7%	6	0.6%
Employability	42	4.2%	126	12.7%	395	39.9%	424	42.9%	2	0.2%
Engagement	57	5.9%	171	17.6%	477	49.1%	263	27.1%	4	0.4%
Evidence-based policy	188	19.2%	271	27.6%	382	38.9%	119	12.1%	21	2.1%
Framework	73	7.4%	192	19.5%	512	52.0%	201	20.4%	7	0.7%
Line of learning	227	23.3%	312	32.0%	235	24.1%	31	3.2%	169	17.4%
m-learning	327	33.3%	208	21.2%	92	9.4%	8	0.8%	347	35.3%
NEETs	353	35.8%	170	17.3%	341	34.6%	19	1.9%	102	10.4%
Pedagogy	131	13.3%	130	13.2%	499	50.8%	158	16.1%	65	6.6%
Personalisation	87	8.9%	276	28.2%	361	36.8%	235	24.0%	21	2.1%
Responsive (-ness)	59	6.0%	193	19.6%	379	38.5%	347	35.3%	6	0.6%
Safeguard (-ing)	67	6.9%	201	20.6%	358	36.6%	327	33.5%	24	2.5%
Scaffolding learning	304	31.0%	235	24.0%	234	23.9%	22	2.2%	186	19.0%
Stakeholder	81	8.2%	231	23.5%	409	41.6%	251	25.5%	11	1.1%
Virtual Learning Environment	104	10.6%	208	21.2%	561	57.2%	101	10.3%	7	0.7%

4. Which other jargon words or phrases really make you mad?

Communication methods

Glossy flyers, newspapers, emails or letters – what captures your eye?

5. How do you generally keep informed about what's happening in education and training? Please select all that apply.

	Frequency	Percentage
Important document (eg funding guidance, policy circular, consultation document)	688	69.8%
Flyer for a CPD event received through the post	322	32.7%
Flyer for a CPD event received via email	606	61.5%
Printed newsletter (eg LSN *Briefing*, *Talisman*)	495	50.2%
Electronic newsletter (eg *Connect* from ALP)	579	58.7%
Posted mailing promoting new publications	300	30.4%
Email promoting new publications	496	50.3%
None of the above	28	2.8%
Other	155	15.7%

6. What format of communication do you prefer to receive from government departments and agencies for the following types of information? Please select all that apply

	Email		Post/hard copy		Websites	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
News about government initiatives	545	55.2%	168	17.0%	101	10.2%
New research	453	46.2%	149	15.2%	176	17.9%
New teaching and learning resources	488	49.8%	193	19.7%	178	18.2%
General FE news	498	51.1%	102	10.5%	129	13.2%
Good practice case studies	338	34.6%	183	18.8%	263	26.9%
CPD event marketing (eg free training, workshops and networks)	775	78.8%	96	9.8%	47	4.8%
First reminder about a CPD event	790	80.6%	70	7.1%	31	3.2%
Second reminder about a CPD event	718	73.7%	73	7.5%	27	2.8%
An important document (eg funding guidance, policy circular, consultation document)	429	44.0%	416	42.7%	68	7.0%
First reminder for an important document	756	77.4%	107	11.0%	17	1.7%
Second reminder for an important document	680	70.2%	117	12.1%	15	1.5%

7. Please use this space if you would like to add additional comments:

Sector magazines/ newspapers		Text message		Phone call		I don't have a preference		I prefer not to receive this type of information	
Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
83	8.4%	3	0.3%	5	0.5%	63	6.4%	20	2.0%
114	11.6%		0.0%	1	0.1%	72	7.3%	16	1.6%
49	5.0%		0.0%	1	0.1%	47	4.8%	23	2.3%
165	16.9%		0.0%		0.0%	60	6.2%	20	2.1%
106	10.9%		0.0%		0.0%	60	6.1%	26	2.7%
14	1.4%		0.0%	5	0.5%	33	3.4%	13	1.3%
4	0.4%	2	0.2%	2	0.2%	27	2.8%	54	5.5%
6	0.6%	7	0.7%	11	1.1%	29	3.0%	103	10.6%
21	2.2%	1	0.1%	4	0.4%	22	2.3%	14	1.4%
6	0.6%	3	0.3%	5	0.5%	32	3.3%	51	5.2%
6	0.6%	4	0.4%	11	1.1%	39	4.0%	96	9.9%

8. Government departments and agencies are increasingly using email as their preferred communication tool as it is fast, inexpensive and environmentally friendly. To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither disagree or agree		Agree		Strongly agree	
I prefer to receive information by post in general	182	18.6%	350	35.8%	289	29.6%	123	12.6%	34	3.5%
I prefer email mailings in general	47	4.8%	56	5.7%	173	17.6%	390	39.7%	316	32.2%
I prefer to receive emails that include graphics/images	60	6.1%	144	14.7%	375	38.2%	289	29.5%	113	11.5%
I prefer to receive emails that are personalised/include my name	42	4.3%	72	7.3%	470	47.9%	298	30.3%	100	10.2%
I prefer to receive emails with a small amount of text that introduce a topic but lead onto an attachment or website for further information	29	3.0%	72	7.4%	224	22.9%	453	46.3%	200	20.4%
I prefer to receive emails that provide all of the information	62	6.4%	269	27.7%	345	35.5%	220	22.6%	76	7.8%
I prefer to receive postal mailings that introduce a topic but lead to a website for further information	148	15.4%	303	31.6%	280	29.2%	192	20.0%	37	3.9%
I prefer to receive postal mailings that provide all of the information	173	17.8%	276	28.4%	275	28.3%	185	19.1%	62	6.4%
I prefer to receive publications in the post rather than download them from a website	165	16.9%	266	27.3%	209	21.5%	221	22.7%	113	11.6%
I prefer to receive notice of publications via email with a link to download them from a website	62	6.3%	136	13.9%	276	28.2%	350	35.8%	154	15.7%

Communication frequency and timing

Does visiting your mailbox or opening your email fill you with dread because you know there will be a new pile of information waiting for you to read? How much is too much?

9. LSN has received feedback that some practitioners feel overwhelmed by the volume of information that they receive. How would you rate the amount of external information you receive?

	Freq	%
Too much information	129	13.1%
	172	17.5%
	285	28.9%
The right amount	280	28.4%
	62	6.3%
	28	2.8%
Too little information	29	2.9%

10. On average how many of the following external communication materials would you receive a week?

	Less than 1 per month		Less than 1 per week		1–3 per week		4–6 per week		7 or more per week		I don't receive this type of communication	
Important document (eg funding guidance, policy circular)	285	29.4%	282	29.0%	252	26.0%	31	3.2%	20	2.1%	101	10.4%
Flyer for a CPD event received through the post	335	34.4%	283	29.1%	175	18.0%	39	4.0%	24	2.5%	117	12.0%
Flyer for a CPD event received via email	211	21.6%	317	32.5%	289	29.6%	76	7.8%	37	3.8%	46	4.7%
Printed newsletter (eg LSN *Briefing*, *Talisman*)	368	37.6%	316	32.3%	152	15.5%	23	2.4%	9	0.9%	110	11.2%
Electronic newsletter (eg *Connect* from ALP)	212	21.8%	292	30.0%	269	27.7%	65	6.7%	16	1.6%	118	12.1%
Posted mailing promoting new publications	330	33.7%	270	27.6%	170	17.4%	50	5.1%	24	2.5%	134	13.7%
Email promoting new publications	254	26.1%	287	29.5%	256	26.3%	67	6.9%	35	3.6%	73	7.5%

11. To what extent do you agree with the following statement – My workload prevents me from reading important external information and keeping in touch with what's going on in education and training?

	Freq	%
No, strongly disagree	20	2.0%
No, disagree	171	17.4%
Neither disagree or agree	234	23.8%
Yes, agree	421	42.7%
Yes, strongly agree	139	14.1%

12. How much time would you normally give for reading the following pieces of external communication materials?

	Under 1 min		1–3 mins		4–6 mins	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Important document (eg funding guidance, policy circular)	10	1.0%	66	6.8%	85	8.7%
Flyer for a CPD event received through the post	291	29.9%	367	37.7%	92	9.4%
Flyer for a CPD event received via email	309	31.7%	396	40.7%	89	9.1%
Printed newsletter (eg LSN *Briefing*, *Talisman*)	44	4.6%	149	15.4%	201	20.8%
Electronic newsletter (eg *Connect* from ALP)	66	6.8%	209	21.6%	208	21.5%
Posted mailing promoting new publications	212	21.8%	289	29.8%	123	12.7%
Email promoting new publications	239	24.6%	369	38.0%	113	11.6%

7–9 mins		Longer if required		I would discard this type of information		It would depend on the communication		I don't receive this type of communication	
Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%				
38	3.9%	532	54.6%	2	0.2%	176	18.1%	66	6.8%
20	2.1%	31	3.2%	25	2.6%	76	7.8%	72	7.4%
20	2.1%	41	4.2%	14	1.4%	80	8.2%	25	2.6%
112	11.6%	247	25.6%	12	1.2%	124	12.8%	77	8.0%
92	9.5%	163	16.9%	13	1.3%	123	12.7%	92	9.5%
49	5.0%	74	7.6%	31	3.2%	116	11.9%	77	7.9%
27	2.8%	61	6.3%	20	2.1%	106	10.9%	36	3.7%

13. **When you receive a piece of potentially useful external communication material do you pass this information to:**

	Freq	%
A senior colleague/s	257	26.3%
A junior colleague/s	126	12.9%
A colleague in a similar role who the information would be more appropriate to	473	48.4%
I would leave the material in a staff room/kitchen for colleagues	56	5.7%
I don't generally pass material on	66	6.7%

14. **There is a large volume of CPD available from government departments and agencies. For example, when receiving information promoting a regional one-day CPD training event how long before the event date would:**

14.a **You prefer to receive this information for you to arrange/confirm your attendance?**

1–3 weeks		4–6 weeks		7–9 weeks		10–12 weeks		13–15 weeks		More than 16 weeks notice	
Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
74	7.6%	373	38.2%	306	31.3%	170	17.4%	23	2.4%	31	3.2%

14.b **Be your absolute minimum time to receive this information for you to arrange/confirm your attendance?**

1–3 weeks		4–6 weeks		7–9 weeks		10–12 weeks		13–15 weeks		More than 16 weeks notice	
Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
382	39.5%	477	49.3%	77	8.0%	22	2.3%	4	0.4%	6	0.6%

Language

We've seen and heard plenty of arguments about what things should be called. Let's end the debate…

15. Our sector (containing organisations funded by the LSC) has been described in many different ways. What title do you think best describes the 'sector' you work in?

	Freq	%
Further education sector	326	33.1%
Further education system	25	2.5%
Learning and skills sector	193	19.6%
Post-14 education and training	59	6.0%
Post-16 education and training	169	17.2%
TVET – Technical Vocational Education and Training (an international definition)	36	3.7%
I don't mind/I have no preference	122	12.4%
Other	54	5.5%

16. Which term do you think best describes people who teach learners in our sector?

	Freq	%
Teacher	190	19.3%
Trainer	176	17.9%
Practitioner	95	9.7%
Lecturer	214	21.8%
I don't mind/I have no preference	223	22.7%
Other	85	8.6%

17. There is often debate about what to call professional practice that really works. Would you describe this as:

	Freq	%
Best practice	476	48.4%
Good practice	326	33.2%
Best demonstrated practice	54	5.5%
Promising practice	2	0.2%
I don't mind/I have no preference	70	7.1%
Excellent practice	38	3.9%
Other	17	1.7%

Communication from government departments and agencies are often drafted in a particular tone, but does this work for you? Please indicate your preference of the following tones:

18.

Informal								Formal	
Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
28	2.9%	153	15.9%	499	52.0%	210	21.9%	70	7.3%

19.

Summary/ introduction								Detailed	
Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
95	9.9%	238	24.9%	404	42.2%	151	15.8%	69	7.2%

20.

Use of humour								No use of humour	
Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
72	7.5%	207	21.6%	356	37.2%	176	18.4%	147	15.3%

21.

Speaking optimistically								Recognising challenges	
Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
47	4.9%	136	14.3%	411	43.1%	228	23.9%	132	13.8%

22.

Learner focused								Policy focused	
Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
193	20.2%	251	26.3%	398	41.6%	73	7.6%	41	4.3%

23. Please use this space if you would like to add additional comments:

Post-16 education and training is often accused of having a language all of its own, riddled with jargon, policy-speak and acronyms. This report explores how people working across our sector perceive the information they receive from government departments and agencies. Is it written in plain English? Is there too much information? Is the tone right? The report aims to answer these questions, presenting the results of a major national survey and providing useful guidance to all those who communicate with the sector.