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Centre

COLLEGE LEADERSHIP IN THE PANDEMIC

LEARNING FROM CRISIS

A REPORT FROM THE CDN RESEARCH
AND ENHANCEMENT CENTRE

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CONTEXT NOTE

This report was produced using a survey and interviews conducted with college staff undertaking CDN's leadership and coaching programmes before and during the pandemic. The staff involved represent a range of executive, middle and first line managers. The full methodology used to undertake the research is explained in the body of the report. CDN would like to thank all the college staff who participated in this research. We should also like to thank Valerie Jackman, CDN Lead, Leadership and Governance, for her contribution to the development of this report.

FOREWORD

Roddy Millar
Co-Founder and Director
The Scottish Leadership Institute

Change is difficult – and the Covid-19 pandemic brought change to the college sector in Scotland at a speed and size that had never been experienced before. In the real-world change is messy and uncertain, and change conducted extensively and at pace as was needed in the early months of lockdown inevitably stretched and challenged those having to design and implement it. It is to everyone involved's enormous credit that so much was achieved so effectively in that time and the months that followed.

In this extensive piece of research from CDN by Dr Karen Campbell, she expertly identifies through her survey and interviews with leaders at all levels of the college system the significant issues, obstacles and solutions they encountered in leading that change – and valuably, the leadership capacities that proved most effective, and that need to be strengthened and developed to enable the sector to continue to adapt to the changing contexts that education has to deliver in.

What stands out strongly for me is that when there is clear purpose for change, people rise to that challenge and work in collaborative and adaptive ways to deliver outcomes in a speedy and pragmatic fashion. The urgent shift from classroom to online, and the indisputable need to ensure safe and healthy environments for both students and staff, provided a very clear purpose – and the energetic and focused action taken by everyone, accepting the messiness and uncertainty that was inevitably part of the process, was an exemplary response to the situation.

The question now arises, with less urgent and clear purpose for on-going change, how do we create the same level of response amongst all stakeholders, in what is still a complex environment?

What Dr Campbell's report highlights here is that the capacities that worked and enabled change to happen are well-understood. Well-understood both by those that study them, the leadership academics, and those that practice them, anyone who leads - which is just about everyone as we all lead ourselves. Dr Campbell's mapping of the capacities self-identified by the survey and interview respondents to the Inner Development Goal (IDG) capacities demonstrates the huge overlap between the two sets.

The challenge for the Leadership Development sector is to distil those capacities into something concise enough to be memorable and manageable, without losing the breadth and diversity of them in the process. My definition of good leadership is when 'leaders create the conditions for others to do their best work in pursuit of a common objective' – and creating conditions is about setting culture.

The Scottish Leadership Institute works closely with the IDG movement, and we are passionate about enabling organisations that set their culture so that decision-making is devolved to all levels, creating agency and purpose for leaders across the organisation. This has to be done with clear objectives that are well-communicated by senior leaders, and an allowance that mistakes can and will happen in pursuit of that objective. This way trust is built and the agility and responsiveness needed for complex change created.

It is very gratifying to see that this approach worked so well in the extreme conditions Covid-19 created for the Scottish college sector, and that through this report we have such a clear view of what capacities are needed to be developed to take the colleges forward into the uncertainties that lie ahead.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'Whilst it has been challenging and really difficult at times, I think that many of our leaders have really blossomed over the pandemic and have 'stepped up' in ways that we might not have previously expected. The clear focus on doing all we can in the interests of our students and staff has really focused what we do and how we work on a positive basis moving forward.'

College Leader

Context

The Covid-19 pandemic generated unprecedented challenges for every part of society, not least our colleges and their leadership teams. The purpose of this CDN Research Enhancement Centre research project was to capture the experiences of college leaders in coping with the crisis and to ascertain what competencies they believe are essential for leading in VUCA[1] times .

The report charts the reflections of college leaders on what worked and what worked less well as they stepped up to the challenges of the pandemic and the pivot from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. The report forms a set of linked anecdotes that capture their lived experience of the past year and a half, and their view of the leadership competencies required for college leaders. As well as providing a reflective report for use by leaders in the college sector, the research will help to inform the future development of CDN's leadership programmes.

The imperative

The Scottish Funding Council's Coherence and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research report (2021) underlines the significance of college leadership in terms of future sustainability for the sector as a whole and recommends that key stakeholders:

❝ 'Galvanise current and future leaders across tertiary education, skills provision and research to work together to effect system change, building from our existing strengths, to tackle knotty long-term challenges and opportunities, and to develop the system for the future.'

As part of this agenda the necessity to develop adaptive, collaborative leaders is seen to be paramount:

❝ 'To develop the sort of coherent, responsive and sustainable system that Scotland needs for the future requires a different sort of adaptive, collaborative leadership. We should invest in the leadership that will make change happen.'

The same report recognises that the pandemic forced impressive examples of adaptive collective leadership - from quickly repurposing estates to provide Covid-19 PPE support, hastily and proactively altering teaching methods to meet rapidly evolving circumstances, and working with community partners and other agencies to offer spaces for alternative use. Already established partnerships and alliances between schools, colleges, universities, employers and other agencies were utilised and enhanced to address the challenges of the pandemic.

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1   Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous

Moving forward, it is clear that if college leaders are to be empowered to work with key stakeholders to interpret nationally shared aims, such as the principles of Curriculum for Excellence and the aims of Developing the Young Workforce, then they need to have the capacities to do so. This report points to the leadership competencies required for Scotland's colleges in this regard.

Key questions

College leaders from across the Scottish sector at all levels including executive, middle and first-line management, who have engaged with CDN's training and development programmes were asked five key questions:

- What were the biggest challenges they faced as a result of the pandemic?
- How did they and the broader leadership team deal with those challenges?
- What helped them respond to the challenges?
- What hindered their response?
- What competencies do they believe are essential for leading in VUCA[2] times?

Findings

From a college leadership perspective, findings reveal the:

Main areas of concern when the pandemic started
- Ensuring staff and student safety, health and well-being and
- How to deliver online learning

When restrictions allowed for some staff and students to return to campus, the learning and teaching focus switched to concerns about delivering blended learning and, later, a hybrid staff and student experience.

Key challenges
- Supporting staff to ensure student success in the online environment
- Developing and enhancing digital capabilities
- Addressing digital poverty
- Devising a Critical Incident Plan
- Communication planning

Core leadership factors
Core leadership factors that have made and are continuing to make the response to the pandemic effective include:

- Agile leadership approach
- Consultation and collaboration
- Building trust
- Communication

Leadership response that worked and key features
Aspect of the leadership response that has worked particularly well and the features that make this aspect of leadership effective:

- Responsiveness/decision-making/agility
- Communication
- Planning
- Building trust
- College partnerships and sectoral engagement

The situation now

- Clear and effective policies, procedures and processes that are embedded
- New systems designed to deliver online learning
- Agile and responsive leadership approach
- Increased confidence, resilience and digital capabilities
- Homeworking and remote learning and teaching are part of the 'new normal'
- IT resources shortages are improving but remain a challenge
- Consistent interpretation of guidelines in different settings is still challenging

What a positive future looks like

Leaders want to continue to develop the culture of leadership support for staff and students that had been enhanced since the onset of the pandemic. This leadership approach was reported to involve:

- Strategic direction
- Agility
- Autonomy/culture of empowerment
- Collegiate working and partnerships
- Blended/hybrid learning and teaching
- Communication

Leadership competencies during the pandemic

Personal leadership competences that helped college leaders to lead effectively during the pandemic:

- Resilience
- Emotional intelligence
- Empathy
- Flexibility/adaptability/agility/managing change
- Strategic, evidence-based approach
- Task and solution-focused/multi-tasking
- Communication skills
- Digital skills
- Ability to delegate

Leadership competencies identified in this research mapped to the Inner Development Goals (IDGs)

See following page.

Conclusions

The findings from this research demonstrate that, despite the significant challenges posed to college leadership during the pandemic, effective leadership encompasses a systems approach that includes agility, responsiveness, a solutions-focused, evidence-based, response to strategic planning and decision-making that involves all stakeholders, cross-sectoral engagement and builds trust. While it is recognised that these leadership factors have long been known, evidence from this research validate their credibility in terms of college leaders' experience of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The personal leadership competencies identified in this research can be seen to have enabled leaders to take a systems approach through increased and enhanced collaboration internally and across and between colleges and other stakeholders. The personal leadership competencies identified in this research map closely to the Inner Development Goals: Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating and Acting.

The IDGs should be used as framework for future college leadership development. It is important that the IDGs are embedded within college leadership programmes and that these are included in all staff development so that the sector is able to benefit from developing leaders at all levels. Leaders who have developed IDGs are enabled to work towards the Sustainable Development Goals for the sort of adaptive, collaborative leadership prescribed in the Coherence and Sustainability agenda. Focusing leadership development on the IDG framework has the potential to embed sustainability within college delivery and develop the coherent, responsive and sustainable system Scotland's colleges have signed up to the College Sector Statement of Ambition 2021 – 2026, for the benefit of all stakeholders.

College Leadership Competencies during the pandemic mapped to the Inner Development Goals

Being
Relationship to self

Empathy	Openness
Resilience	Adaptability
Integrity	Self-reflection
Authenticity	Self-belief
Positivity	Confidence

Collaborating
Social skills

'Soft' leadership approach	Recognising individual strengths
Inclusivity	Mobilising resources
Supportive relationships	Co-creation of skills

Acting
Driving change

Agile leadership	Being goal-oriented
Visible leadership	Creative solutions
Putting staff and students first	Building capabilities
Decision-making	Delegating effectively

Thinking
Cognitive skills

Outcomes-focused	Thinking as an influencer
Complexity awareness	Reflecting
Knowledge and understanding	Critical thinking
Sense making	Long-term orientation and visioning

Relating
Caring for others and the world

Human focus	Providing reassurance
Listening	Appreciation
Emotional intelligence	Building trust
Open and honest communication	

Being — Relationship to self

Acting — Driving change

Inner Development Goals

Thinking — Cognitive skills

Collaborating — Social skills

Relating — Caring for others and the world

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-21 has generated unprecedented challenges for every part of society, not least our colleges and their leadership teams. While the strategic impact on the sector and the changes in practice, pedagogy and approaches to learning that have emerged from this period will be examined through various routes in the coming months and years, CDN was also keen to capture the experiences of leaders in coping with the crisis.

The purpose of this CDN Research and Enhancement Centre research project was to ask leaders at all levels including executive, middle- and first-line management, who have engaged with CDN's training and development programmes five key questions, developed in consultation with Valerie Jackman, CDN Leadership and Governance Lead:

- What were the biggest challenges they faced as a result of the pandemic?
- How did they and the broader leadership team deal with those challenges?
- What helped them respond to the challenges?
- What hindered their response?
- What capacities do they believe are essential for leading in VUCA[3] times?

The aim of the research was to provide answers to these questions, and to chart the reflections of college leaders on what worked and what worked less well, to form a set of linked anecdotes that capture their lived experience of the past year and a half and their view of the leadership competencies required for college leaders. As well as providing a reflective report for use by leaders in the college sector, the research will help to inform the future development of CDN's leadership programmes.

3   Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous

The SFC's Coherence and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research report (2021) underlines the significance of college leadership in terms of future sustainability for the sector as a whole and recommends that key stakeholders:

> 'Galvanise current and future leaders across tertiary education, skills provision and research to work together to effect system change, building from our existing strengths, to tackle knotty long-term challenges and opportunities, and to develop the system for the future.'

As part of this agenda the necessity to develop adaptive, collaborative leaders is seen to be paramount:

> 'To develop the sort of coherent, responsive and sustainable system that Scotland needs for the future requires a different sort of adaptive, collaborative leadership. We should invest in the leadership that will make change happen. We will explore the establishment of a National Leadership Programme that

would bring together colleges and universities to invest in adaptive leaders who will become the innovators we need to develop our system for the future.'

The same report recognises that the pandemic forced impressive examples of adaptive collective leadership - from quickly repurposing estates to provide Covid-19 PPE support, rapidly and proactively altering teaching methods to meet rapidly evolving circumstances and working with community partners and other agencies to offer spaces for alternative use. Already established partnerships and alliances between schools, colleges, universities, employers and other agencies were utilised and enhanced to address the challenges of the pandemic. Moving forward, it is clear that if college leaders are to be empowered to work with key stakeholders to interpret nationally shared aims, such as the principles of Curriculum for Excellence and the aims of Developing the Young Workforce then they need to have the capacities to do so, as the report concludes:

" 'If we are to continue to prioritise this sort of adaptive leadership we will need to work together across our system and in collaboration with other stakeholders.'

2. METHODOLOGY

The project adopted an appreciative inquiry approach. This was selected for two reasons:

- It is an assets-based approach that is uniquely suited to large-scale organisational change; and
- It has a focus on the positives and is forward-looking for future planning while also capturing less positive experiences.

Appreciative Inquiry is a co-operative, co-evolutionary search for best practice and ideas to take an organisation forward, underpinned by a belief that the questions we ask contribute to the world we create (Preskill and Catsambas 2006). The Appreciative Inquiry interview is thus crucial to the process. Appreciative Inquiry questions are designed to focus on what stakeholders value, want to grow and are willing to take responsibility for making happen. The purpose of framing questions in this way is to focus on creative solutions that move the focus away from a blame culture and toward a shared vision for the future. The aim of Appreciative Inquiry is therefore to build on the root cause of success, not of failure, to build on strengths, not weaknesses (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

Research participants

The project involved a survey and interviews with senior, middle and first-line college leaders who have engaged in leadership development with CDN and/or leaders who have engaged in cross sector group coaching through CDN, to indicate the common challenges that leaders across the sector have experienced. There was a diverse range of participants in terms of college leadership roles including depute, vice and assistant principals with responsibility for academic strategy, curriculum, people, quality and finances and senior leaders with responsibility for curriculum development, quality, student support, and the student experience.

The five key questions (above) were developed into 12 questions for the survey to address the following questions from a college leadership perspective.

Online survey questions addressed:

- What happened when the pandemic started and what the situation is now
- What college leaders value most about the leadership team's response to the pandemic
- The core leadership factors that have made/are making the response effective
- Aspects of the leadership response that worked particularly well and the features that make these effective
- Imagining that it is three years into the future and the staff and student experience is just as leaders would want it to be…what's happening that makes the experience successful
- What has changed and how has the leadership team contributed to this future
- The developments that have been made to get to this future point
- What has stayed the same
- What can leaders stop doing because it no longer serves or gets in the way

Interview questions were developed from the survey responses and aimed to delve deeper into leaders' experiences of the pandemic. Additionally, interview questions were designed to elicit college leaders' views on the competencies required for college leaders in the 21st century.

Interview questions sought to explore:

- Leaders' priorities during the pandemic
- What changes leaders had to make to their leadership practice
- What personal competencies were most important when leading during the pandemic
- How leaders define these competencies
- Why leaders believe these competencies are important
- Examples of these competencies in action during the pandemic
- Moving forward, in terms of what leaders have learned, what features they aim to maintain in their leadership approach
- What features of leadership worked less well and will leaders leave in the past

Survey and interview questions are listed in appendices 1 and 2 respectively.

Interviews were transcribed and a 6-phase thematic analysis of the dataset (survey plus interviews) was undertaken to identify key themes across the dataset which related to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

This involved: familiarisation with the data set; generating initial codes to identify a feature of the data and collating the data by code; searching for themes; reviewing and refining themes; defining and naming themes, counting the number of respondents who mentioned and provided evidence for each theme and writing up the analysis by theme with reference to the research questions. Specifically, an inductive or 'bottom up' analytic approach to thematic analysis was used whereby analysis was guided by the themes that emerged from the data, rather than by prior theoretical accounts.

The research was completed over a five month period ending in February 2022. Leaders were invited to complete the online survey and to participate in follow-up, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews about their experience of leading through the pandemic.

Findings are presented in terms of the leadership response to the pandemic (Section 3) and the core competencies identified by college leaders that enabled them to lead during VUCA times (Section 4). Leadership competencies identified in the research are mapped to the Inner Development Goals in Section 5.

3. THE LEADERSHIP RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

This section highlights key themes emerging from the research. Exemplar quotes from leaders are included to highlight their personal response to the challenges faced, what aspects of their leadership came to the fore and how these leadership competencies impacted their decision making and the outcomes for them as leaders and from the college's perspective.

3.1 Main areas of concern when the pandemic started

- Ensuring staff and student safety, health and well-being
- How to deliver online learning

From a college leadership perspective, the main areas of concern when the pandemic started fell into two broad categories; ensuring staff and student safety, health and well-being, and how to deliver online learning. When restrictions allowed for some staff and students to return to campus, the learning and teaching focus switched to concerns about delivering blended learning and, later, a hybrid staff and student experience.

It is recognised that some colleges were already delivering a substantial amount of content online before the onset of the pandemic while others were less practised in this kind of delivery.

Staff and student safety, health and well-being were very much a priority for college leaders at the start of the pandemic. Concerns centred around the practical implications of safe delivery and working practices. Leaders were concerned to protect their staff and students while focusing on their ability to ensure students' learning needs were not adversely affected. At the same time, the ability of leaders to deliver core support services remotely (e.g. payroll and supplier payments) to ensure the sustainability of the college via continuity of business-critical provision was also brought into focus. Maximising student success and retention were also concerns as leaders responded to the immediacy of the changes required during lockdown. The short and medium-term impact on staff and student well-being was very much a priority along with planning and mobilising the resources and methodologies required to ensure the continuation of learning and teaching virtually:

" **'Our immediate concern was ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of students and staff along with continuity of business-critical provision.'**

How to deliver classes and assessments online and how to support students and staff to move to a new blended learning model became the next priority following the initial focus that was on safety, health and well-being. Leaders reported that these immediate challenges were made more challenging in the face of a rapidly changing global context, the immediacy of the changes required and the 'ever changing' guidance being issued at the time. Mobilising delivery from face-to-face to online learning raised issues of practicality such as maintaining connectivity with staff and students for those without access to appropriate devices or poor internet access at home. The latter was a concern even for leaders in colleges where online delivery was very much part of the norm and where investment had already been made in terms of resources, training and staff and student support:

" **'Our main concern was how to mobilise delivery to online from face-to-face whilst maintaining connectivity with staff and students.'**

3.2 Key challenges

- Supporting staff to ensure student success in the online environment
- Developing and enhancing digital capabilities
- Addressing digital poverty
- Devising a Critical Incident Plan
- Communication planning

Supporting staff to ensure student success in the online environment was a key challenge for all leaders participating in the research. Developing and enhancing digital capabilities was prioritised to ensure that staff and students had the digital capabilities to work from home. Ensuring engaging content was still being delivered, monitoring attendance for students and designing a range of new online assessments were cited as examples of concerns around digital capabilities, as well as ensuring access to the necessary resources for staff and students to enable online delivery and connectivity in remote areas of the region.

Digital poverty was also a significant challenge and one that was uppermost in leaders' minds at the outbreak of the pandemic as they strove to maintain equity. Providing all students with a suitable digital device and Wi-Fi access along with time to adapt teaching content and upskilling staff where required were prioritised amid a rapidly evolving situation and uncertainty:

'Enhancing digital capabilities and upskilling of staff and students was a significant challenge. We also needed to ensure we had access to the necessary resources for staff and students to enable online delivery.'

Another key challenge reported by college leaders related to the provision of guidance, especially at the onset of the pandemic. Leaders were keen to point out that they recognise that all organisations were operating in unprecedented circumstances and that all faced significant challenges during what were VUCA times. Nonetheless, the issue of Covid-19 guidelines and restrictions changing rapidly as the situation developed was a significant leadership challenge. The need to respond by establishing new processes and procedures for working and studying remotely within short timeframes while managing and maintaining

student and staff wellbeing was reported to be particularly challenging. This situation, for example, impacted leaders' ability to manage school-college relationships where the stakeholders were operating under very different Covid restrictions. A further challenge related to the college response being dependent on the response of other key stakeholders such as the awarding bodies.

Communicating with staff and students clearly, quickly and effectively was paramount but required careful planning so that staff and students were reassured about the impact on learning and services and managing anxiety and stress around health, safety and the uncertainty of the future in all respects, in and out of work and the learning experience. Ensuring that staff and students were safe and felt safe so that students could complete their studies was a top priority. Devising a Critical Incident Plan that set out key actions that were within the college's control included establishing clear communication links for staff, students and other stakeholders, delegating tasks to lead staff and establishing testing remote systems access and quality controls proved challenging in the face of much uncertainty.

3.3   The situation now

- Clear and effective policies, procedures and processes that are embedded
- New systems designed to deliver online learning
- Agile and responsive leadership approach
- Increased confidence, resilience and digital capabilities
- Homeworking and remote learning and teaching are part of the 'new normal'
- IT resources shortages are improving but remain a challenge
- Consistent interpretation of guidelines in different settings is still challenging

In terms of the current situation (as of February 2022) research participants outlined the ways in which the challenges that emerged as the pandemic began have been and are continuing to be addressed and overcome. Leaders reported clear and effective policies, procedures and processes that are embedded in new systems designed to deliver online as learning and teaching have been transformed from face-to-face to largely online and blended but switching to hybrid delivery. The agile and responsive leadership approach to the pandemic is reported to have resulted in more confident, resilient and digitally able staff and students, a successful blended learning approach including a significant amount of new digital content and assessments. Students were being permitted to access college buildings and facilities to carry out practical activities whilst completing more theory-based aspects of their course at home. Homeworking, remote teaching and hybrid working were described as 'now normal' and communication systems are proving effective.

As a result of an investment in digital capabilities to ensure that all staff have the skills to deliver fully online when necessary, leaders reported a greater awareness and confidence among staff in using digital skills:

" **'Now staff have laptops and most things have been migrated to SharePoint. My team has evaluated the units we deliver and how we do it. We have found new approaches and participated in training to make sure that teaching staff have the skills to deliver fully online when necessary. We had a full year where we taught online and over that time we completely overhauled our materials, assessments and delivery approaches. We are now confident to deliver in a variety of ways.'**

Current challenges include an ongoing issue with a shortage of IT resources to ensure that all students have access to a laptop although this situation is reported to be much improved than at the start of lockdown. Given the complex nature of the college environment, the consistent interpretation of guidelines in different settings is also still challenging leaders. Managing the transition between lockdown, amended Covid mitigations and the blend of in-person and remote learning means ensuring college campuses continue to be safe and feel safe for staff and students to ensure students can complete their studies with the appropriate support mechanisms in place. Leaders report significant arrangements that have been put in place to support and monitor the mental health and well-being of staff and students. Communication around these areas is reported to be critical in helping staff, students and stakeholders engage with the college and navigate the new post-pandemic hybrid working and learning arrangements.

There was a concern expressed by some respondents that school-college relationships have suffered, citing a oss of confidence in colleges by schools which was adversely affecting recruitment and articulation. Another ongoing concern for leaders was the reluctance of some staff and students to return to face-to-face teaching.

Overall, the current situation is viewed positively by college leaders who are keen that the learning gained from having to respond to such a volatile and complex set of circumstances is utilised for the sector as whole:

> **'Some good things came from the pandemic and the colleges' response to it. We must act to keep the good and not make rash decisions about how things will move forward; communication is normalising, learning and services are beginning to normalise. Some elements are still uncertain but we have to retain the good bits.'**

3.4　Leadership team's response

- Leadership approach
- Staff and student support
- Prioritising staff and student health and well-being
- Effective communication

Research participants were asked what they valued most about their leadership team's response to the pandemic. 'Leadership team' was defined in the broadest sense. That is, the College's Senior Management Team and the College Board. Respondents valued the leadership team's pragmatic and purposeful approach to change management. The fact that leadership teams took a proactive and solutions-based, team approach to the challenges posed by the pandemic was valued along with realistic expectations about what could be achieved and a clear delegation of roles and responsibilities which were clearly communicated and visible:

> **'Openness, pragmatism and solution focus, always balanced with health, safety and wellbeing concerns.'**

Maintaining an effective relationship between the Senior Management Team and Board was also deemed valuable as were regular whole-team leadership meetings, developing a clear programme of work and adopting a project management approach that ensured an effective distribution of responsibilities. This approach was seen as engendering a high level of trust and respect in the leadership team showing them to be supportive and empowering of staff:

> **'There is an excellent leadership team dynamic. I was trusted and given the autonomy to organise as seen fit.'**

Leaders valued their leadership team's commitment to staff and student support in the widest sense. Offering flexibility and recognising and understanding the stresses that online learning posed for students and staff alike were highlighted:

> **'The purposeful and student centric approach adopted, everyone (not just senior staff) really have gone above and beyond to support our students and each other. They were proactive, they made us feel valued and supported.'**

Prioritising staff and student health and well-being was especially valued and referenced in responses to almost every question posed as part of the research. Leaders valued how staff and students' health had been and continues to be at the forefront of all decision making. The trust shown to staff in working from home was also valued:

> **'Our college has definitely made the health and well-being of both students and staff their main priority, closely followed by getting digital equipment to those in need. This has brought the college community closer together, something that I value greatly.'**

3.5   Core leadership factors

- Agile leadership approach
- Consultation and collaboration
- Building trust
- Communication

Core leadership factors that have made and are continuing to make the response to the pandemic effective include a leadership approach that is open, inclusive, responsive, dynamic, decisive, agile, solutions-focused, pragmatic, flexible, committed and planned. Collaboration and communication were deemed essential for an effective response to the pandemic. A collegiate approach to decision making that involved a clear and decisive response around expectations was also reported as a core leadership factor:

'Commitment. Dedicating time and resource to planning, not merely responding to guidance or national updates. Effective communications. Target setting. Visible leadership. Supportive leadership. Inclusive leadership.'

An open an inclusive leadership approach that focused on people and trust was essential. Leaders were keen to stress that staff had to know that they were trusted to deliver the best possible online student experience with the resources available to them:

❝ **'Openness, pragmatism and a human-centred approach and allowing the flexibility for curriculum teams to deliver the best fit for their students.'**

Again, communication was a prominent theme in responses to questions about core leadership factors positively impacting the response to the pandemic. Clear communication strategies that outlined the expectations students and staff and provided regular updates about the way forward were seen as not just helpful but essential, especially during lockdown:

❝ **'Open communication has helped. Even when there were no changes or updates from the Scottish Government there were still emails sent out to staff and students keeping them in the loop and reminding them that they were not forgotten about.'**

3.6   Leadership responses that worked and key features

- Responsiveness/decision-making/agility
- Communication
- Planning
- Building trust
- College partnerships and sectoral engagement

Research participants were asked to name one aspect of the leadership response that has worked particularly well and to define the features that make this aspect of leadership effective.

Responsiveness in terms of decision-making was cited most frequently. Responding quickly to changing guidance meant a solutions-focused leadership approach that tackled challenges such as students and staff access to appropriate digital equipment and training. Key features of responsiveness included delineating clear roles and being decisive in terms of addressing issues as these arose. A collaborative approach to decision making was also deemed important:

❝ **'Everyone has an input as opposed to a command.'**

Developing and putting in place a Critical Incident Plan to outline how college campuses should close for lockdown and, later re-open and how to deliver remote learning and teaching was cited as a leadership feature that worked well:

> **'The Critical Incident Plan was developed in late February / early March 2020 and put the College ahead of the lockdown. This prior preparation and planning made a significant difference to the College's response, setting a strong foundation.'**

Planning included developing new collaborative working arrangements with key stakeholders including college students' associations, schools, employers, awarding bodies and other sector organisations. A focus on planning allowed leaders to prepare for the changes ahead by developing effective processes to address key challenges:

> **'Planning made the College ready for whatever was coming. It allowed us to set tasks and allocate these to senior staff. This resulted in staff feeling in control of their areas and empowered them to act. This meant the College was not dependent on one or two individuals for direction but had the engagement of the whole college leadership team.'**

A commitment to 'regular', 'clear' and 'open' or 'honest' communication was cited as a leadership factor that worked well during the pandemic. Regular communication provided reassurance to staff and students on what could and could not be done and provided the rationale for decisions. Bulletins coming directly from the Principal's office kept staff informed and were said to promote inclusion as was the cascading of information from leaders:

> **'It is definitely the cascading of information that has worked. The faculty head has regular meetings with Academic Quality Managers and Academic Quality Leads as well as weekly meeting for the whole faculty and encourages continuous communication from the managers.'**

The clarity, transparency and frequency of communication was said to avoid the 'guessing game' as to what was happening and to promote staff confidence in their roles:

> **'Communication is key - if everyone feels they have someone they can talk to (and who listens/feeds upwards) they will feel more confident in their role. Good communication from leaders fosters good communication across staff and leads to a healthier and happier work environment despite the external factors.'**

Effective communication was reported to build trust, make people feel involved and listened to, empower people, helps contribute to people's well-being and buys leaders goodwill:

> **'Good communication means everyone is aware of what is happening and what changes need to be made to keep progressing. It stops the guessing game and allows lecturers to concentrate on teaching rather than worrying about other factors.'**

Trust was another aspect of leadership that was seen as contributing positively on the response to the pandemic. Trusting and supporting staff to perform their roles in an entirely new context was said to generate cohesiveness within teams. A key feature of trust was empathy.

> **'We had to build trust. This takes genuine consultation, a constructive "critical friend" approach, open and honest communication, a willingness to make decisions and own them. Building trust requires an empathetic approach.'**

Other features of college leadership deemed to have worked well in the face of the pandemic and which leaders wished to see continue were cross-college partnerships and enhanced sectoral engagement. In interviews, leaders reported that the online working environment meant that college Principals, and senior leaders were better able to come together more frequently than they had done pre-pandemic and there was an impetus for this created due to the uncertainty in the sector, particularly at the onset of the crisis although enhanced inter-college and cross-sectoral communication and collaboration are said to be continuing as part of the 'new normal':

> **'Cross-college partnership work has been much improved during the pandemic - there are huge benefits to colleges working more closely together, at all levels.'**

> **'Better sectoral engagement, Principals working together and discussing things at a sectoral level, colleges supporting one another and working more collaboratively have been hugely positive changes.'**

3.7 What a positive future looks like

A hallmark of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology is to focus on the future in order to challenge the status quo. By focusing on the future an organisation's strengths can be utilised in a participatory approach to address current barriers that stand in the way of achieving agreed goals. Thus, from a college leadership perspective, participants were asked to look forward and imagine it is three years into the future and the leadership of their college is exactly as they would you would want it to be. In this future context, leaders were asked what was happening that makes the experience successful; what has changed to allow the leadership of their college to progress to this future point; how the leadership team contributed to this future and what developments were required to get to this future point.

- Strategic direction
- Agility
- Autonomy/culture of empowerment
- Collegiate working and partnerships
- Blended/hybrid learning and teaching
- Communication

In terms of an imagined future, college leaders reported that they wanted to see the current strategic direction of their college continuing. This direction was reported to involve an agile, flexible approach to

delivery that harnesses the best aspects of a blended and hybrid approach. Leaders want to continue to develop the culture of leadership support for staff and students that had been enhanced since the onset of the pandemic; one that would include staff being supported to actively contribute to the success of the college. A structured approach to risk-taking, evidence based decision-making, financial investment and collaboration with other colleges and partners were cited as being required for such an approach to be effective. Responsiveness in terms of learners' needs and workforce demands were cited as part of an imaged future for college leadership:

> **'We are being responsive in terms of the courses we offer to suit the demand in the workforce, campus is accessible to our students again whilst the online/blended model remains in part to maximise access to our courses for all.'**

Staff having more autonomy and a culture of empowerment also formed part of an imagined positive future:

> **'Less management "dipping-down" - more confident and autonomous junior (curriculum and support) managers, a more action-based approach to proactive continuous improvement - solutions**

focused teams who don't wait to be told to act, more meaningful partnerships with students and key partners.'

College leaders wish to build on the collegiate working and partnerships developed or enhanced through the experience of the pandemic:

❝ 'Even more collaboration between all the staff, both academic and corporate, with even more of an understanding of the core purpose of the organisation.'

The imagined future also included all staff having accepted and adopted the new ways of working and having been provided with the support to work more flexibly. Communication was again a central feature of the perfect future:

❝ 'Acceptance of new ways of working, with flexibility and parity of experience - work and study from anywhere is a reality where it can be aspired to; people have time to talk to one another, people understand and value good communication and connections; we don't get hung up on the little things, we are a proactive and supportive community.'

A blended and hybrid leaning experience were seen as forming the core elements of the imaged future for college leaders:

> **'Allow for blended learning where it suits the curriculum but it's important to have that face to face teaching for a multitude of reasons.'**

Aspects that would have to change to allow the leadership team to progress to this future point included cultural change and supporting and developing leadership. Cultural change included more voices being heard across the college to show where it can develop:

> **'Staff have been supported to become leaders in their own team and take more responsibility (recognised with promoted posts) and there has been a culture shift to embrace change and new ideas.'**

Developing college leadership for the future was deemed to involve a focus on leadership skills development, collaborative and collective goal setting and allowing staff greater autonomy in decision-making:

> **'People are expected to take decisions and have a solution focussed approach. The culture of passing decisions up the tree is no longer in existence and staff who try this are required to come back with recommended actions.**

> **Greater clarity of remits and spheres of responsibility. Goals are collective and can only be achieved through joint working and not silo based targets.'**

The imagined future in terms of developing college leadership was also associated with establishing greater clarity around leadership roles and responsibilities and providing continuous professional development:

> **'Clarity in terms of management hierarchy, structure and role scope. Managers at all levels have been supported to identify skills gaps, have invested time in developing their skillsets and have done this with their own direct-reports too. Significant investment in talent identification and development to support future leaders and managers.'**

Participants outlined the ways in which the leadership team might contribute to this future vision for their respective colleges. Factors included, embracing and promoting cultural change, strategic planning and decision-making, supporting staff to feel empowered to feedback on strategic decision making, allowing more staff autonomy and leadership development:

> **'The culture would have changed to a much more collegiate feel and approach.'**

Encouraging ownership of strategic decisions and leading by example were also deemed part of the way forward for college leadership:

> **'Agreed annual priorities, commitment to owning key strategic decisions and modelling core behaviours and qualities, agreed standards and willingness to push each other to constantly improve.'**

Leaders encouraging greater autonomy, providing opportunities for staff development and promoting a feedback culture were all ways in which leadership teams might contribute to this future vision for their respective colleges:

> **'There is a different focus where leaders encourage more autonomy and more learning and development for staff and are more open to feedback.'**

Encouraging greater autonomy and staff development were associated with allowing individuals to learn from those experiences where decisions had proved not to have worked out well:

> **'People have been able to 'fail' and supported to learn from these moments.'**

3.8 Developments required to get to this future point

- Strategic vision
- Leadership development
- New structures and ways of working

In response to what developments would need to happen in order to get to this future point, emerging themes included a strategic vision, adaptive leadership development and introducing new structures and working methods. In terms of the strategic vision for the college, leaders emphasised an approach that included collaborative goal setting:

'Clear vision and targets. Targets set are set collectively, i.e. where departments and areas connect to prevent a silo mentality or individual pursuits of success.'

Adaptive leadership was described in terms of leaders' ability to respond to a fast-changing environment. Investment in leadership training and development to promote adaptive leadership was deemed essential:

'Investment in training for leaders to develop skills to respond to a fast-changing environment is going to be essential. We should be learning from other sectors on how to lead adaptably; focussing on strategic ambition and training leaders in communication and collaboration skills.'

Review and restructuring of the curricula and pedagogy, support team structures and college business processes were deemed essential developments to reach the ideal future point. Investments in digital infrastructures and technological resources and training were viewed as necessary to continue to lead with agility. Investing in continued professional development and promoting the sharing of best practice was also seen to be prerequisite for future college sustainability. A continued focus on staff and student mental health and well-being (the 'human focus') was also deemed necessary along with collaboration with and support from college Boards:

'Restructure of curriculum management structures with pedagogy in mind; regular formal review of all support team structures and business processes; commitment to a collaborative service-design approach to all strategic planning and development; effective and consistent approach to individual and team performance management, strategically planned programme of CPD.'

'Investment in digital infrastructure, commitment to working together as a Senior Leadership Team, support from a constructively challenging Board, societal focus on wellbeing and mental health.'

4. LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

This section highlights the leadership competences that came to fore for college leaders during the pandemic. A discussion of leadership competencies was built into the design of the research interviews to obtain definitions and examples of such competencies in action throughout the pandemic.

Leadership competencies

Survey respondents were asked to describe the personal competencies that helped them to lead effectively during the pandemic. Follow-up interviews were utilised to delve deeper into how leaders defined the leadership competencies they had named, what were the key features of the respective competencies and to provide examples of the competencies in action.

- Resilience
- Emotional intelligence
- Empathy
- Flexibility/adaptability/agility/managing change
- Strategic, evidence-based approach
- Task and solution-focused/multi-tasking

- Communication skills
- Digital skills
- Ability to delegate

Resilience was the most cited personal competency for effective leadership during crisis. For some respondents, this meant remaining calm and positive when, at the onset of the pandemic, things were changing rapidly and leadership decisions were being taken relatively quickly:

> **'Calm in the face of adversity, organised and pragmatic, positive, decisive, openness to discussion and feedback.'**

Resilience has been identified as a valuable characteristic in leadership (Smith, 2017). Coaching for resilience has become a topic of considerable interest in recent years as a way to support leaders in dealing with the challenging working environment and often highly volatile organisational settings (Heifetz et al., 2009; Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

Empathy with staff and students and emotional intelligence were also frequently cited by respondents which was often cited alongside an ability for self-reflection. Leaders referenced requiring empathy to be able to be supportive:

> **'Supportive and empathetic nature of leadership, allowing people to take time, work flexibly and understanding the stresses and strains that the online working environment posed.'**

The value of empathy as a leadership competency is well documented (See, for example: Stefano, 2005; Jin, 2010; Holt et al., 2017). Empathy enhances organisational effectiveness by inspiring diversity and inclusion, increases employee engagement and retention, and creates a culture of responsibility, care, and innovation. With respect to the pandemic it has been classed an essential ingredient of leadership (Zivkovic, 2022). Furthermore, empathy is a competency that leaders themselves value as an instructional leadership competency and one that has been shown to be an interpersonal skill of emotionally intelligent school principals (Singh and Dali, 2013). Showing concern for employees is recognised as a core leadership competency (Albrecht and

Andreetta, 2011). An ability for self-reflection, which implies self-awareness and self-assessment, has been shown to be a precondition for effective leadership (Dombrowski and Mielke, 2014).

Demonstrating trust in staff was seen by leaders as being aligned to having empathy. Trust was referenced by most respondents and was a key theme in terms of core leadership competencies. Trust was seen as a factor that enabled staff to take ownership of decision making about learning and teaching in the new context:

> **'Trust, genuine consultation, constructive "critical friend" approach, open and honest communication, willingness to make decisions and own them.'**

The importance of leaders fostering empowerment and trust is well documented (Kent, 2006; Boutros and Joseph, 2007; Aij et al, 2015). Consultation and collaboration are factors that are known to impact leadership positively (Brymen and Lilly, 2009).

Listening, being available, being flexible and having the ability to adapt to a changing situation were described as key leadership competencies for managing change along with an ability to multi-task:

'Task focussed, ability to work under pressure on multiple tasks to multiple (and conflicting) deadlines, self-belief in a crisis, reactive and responsive to changes.'

The ability to listen has been recognised as a feature of leadership that allows people to feel heard (Willis et al., 2016). Adapting to changing situations during uncertain times is another valuable leadership competency that forms part of an agile leadership response (Applebaum et al., 2017).

Being solutions-focused and remaining positive were also cited frequently in terms of key leadership competencies, including pointing out some of the more positive impacts of the pandemic for staff:

'I think having a positive outlook and being goal orientated really helped me as a leader during this time. When staff felt overwhelmed I was able to reduce the noise, allocate achievable tasks and remind everyone of the skills, opportunities and experience we were gaining.'

Fullan (2020) suggests that leadership must be conceived in terms joint determination of solutions which allows leaders to become system players.

Most respondents reported that their digital skills provided them with the confidence to make leadership decisions as the college moved from face-to-face to online delivery at the onset of the pandemic. Again, communication was a key theme and referenced in terms of a key leadership competency:

'I think being a strong communicator and being technically minded really helped throughout the pandemic. It meant it was not challenging to move my work online and I was able to help my team and offer emotional or technical support.'

Communication is a central leadership competency. To be truly effective, both leaders and managers must develop their self awareness and become role models for communication in an organisation. An important part of a leader's role is to support the organisation's leaders and managers in developing their communication competence (Bennis, 2007).

Some respondents named many features of the competencies required for leadership during the pandemic including the ability to delegate:

'Ability to delegate effectively, methodical (project management-based) approach to task allocation, willingness to take decisions, ability to hold people to account (constructively), confidence in my own standards, knowledge and skills - ability to explain "what good looks like", highly reflective - evaluating and reviewing decisions and seeking frequent feedback.'

It is known that effective leaders should be able to delegate noncore tasks to others (Pidgeon, 2017). In order to empower and delegate the leader must have trust in the team (Barry, 2012). Delegating work at the appropriate time, and to the appropriate individual or team, gives the employees independence and confidence to pursue end-results on their own (Whetten & Cameron, 2010). Empowering employees not only means delegating appropriately, but also providing staff the proper resources, the proper authority, and some decision-making in order for them to be truly empowered and effective in their delegated tasks (Redick et al, 2014).

5. LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES AND THE INNER DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Following the data analysis stage of this research, the researcher mapped the leadership competencies emerging from the data set to the Inner Development Goals. The IDGs framework is a useful framework against which to map the college leadership competencies emerging from this research given the policy imperative of delivering education for sustainable development.

Inner Development Goals

Inner Development Goals are both a framework and a blueprint of the capabilities, qualities and skills we need in order to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recognising that the SDGs cover a wide range of issue that involve people with different needs, values and convictions, the IDG global initiative was developed in response to a perceived lack of progress in achieving the SDGs in an attempt to highlight the power of inner abilities and qualities required to meet the SDGs in the context of a complex environment and many challenges.

The ambition is to use personal development to provide a framework for and build the inner abilities and transformative skills needed for a sustainable society. The IDGs initiative has co-creation at its centre with ongoing development and input from experts, scientists, practitioners and organisations around the world. In 2021 the first IDGs report was published that explains the background, method and framework with 5 categories and 23 transformational skills and qualities of human inner growth and development that are especially crucial for leaders to address the SDGs. A full list of the framework's key components with definitions of each of the five categories is provided in Appendix 3.

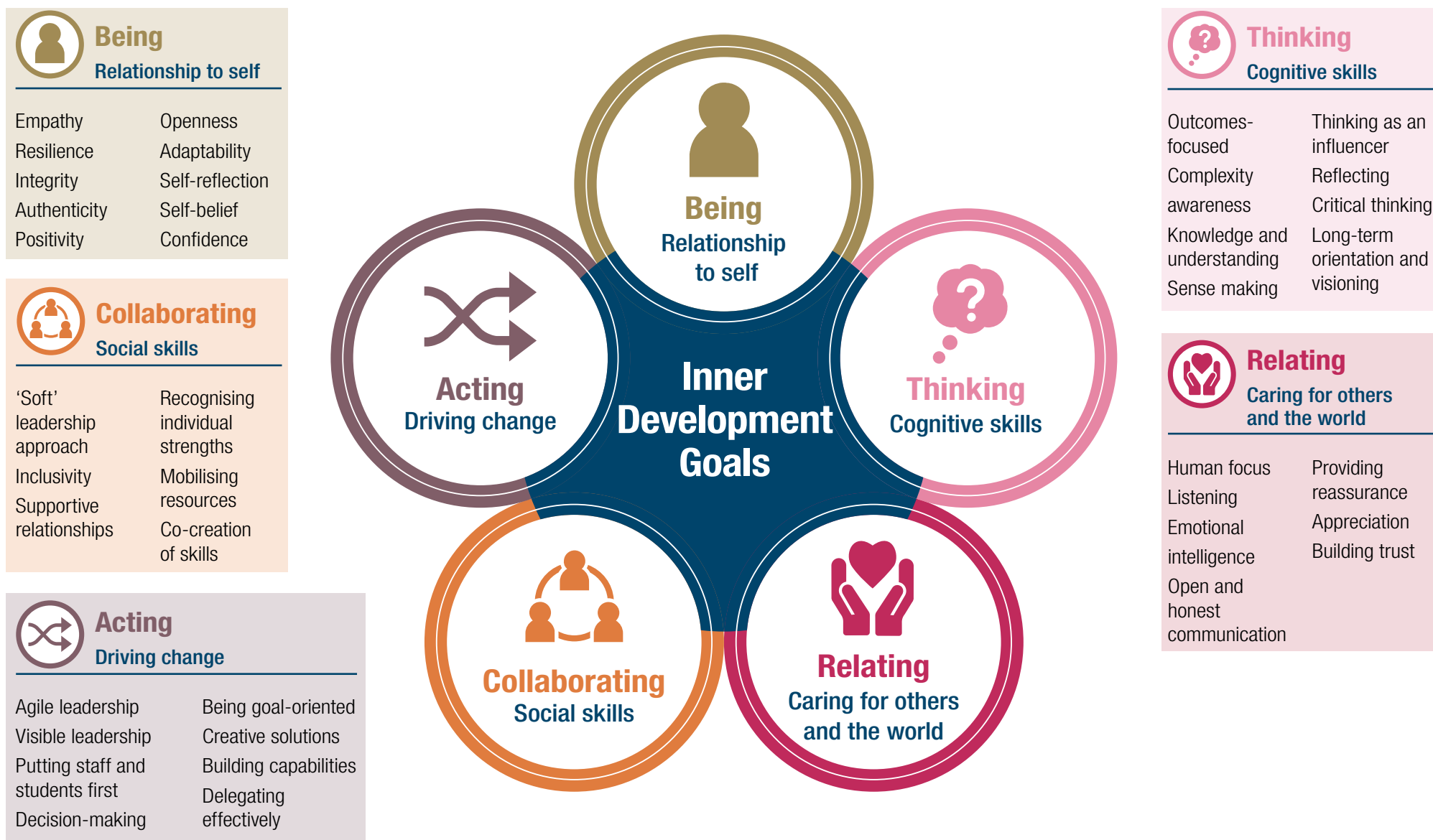**Five categories with 23 skills and qualities**

- Being – Relationship to self
- Thinking – Cognitive skills
- Relating – Caring for others and the world
- Collaborating – Social skills
- Acting – Driving change

From the data analysis of responses to what personal competencies helped college leaders to lead during the pandemic, it is clear that college leadership competencies in VUCA times are complex, multi-faceted and inter-related. It is also important to remember that individuals will have their own definitions and meanings associated with each competency. This is why, in the methodological approach, it was crucial to allow participants to come up with their own labels for and definitions of the respective competencies rather than provide a selection of possible competencies from which to select. To further define each of the competencies emerging from a thematic analysis of the survey data set, interview participants were asked to provide examples of each competency they had mentioned, 'in action' during the pandemic. This section describes the respective leadership competencies identified from the research, in terms of how these map to the Inner Development Goals along with exemplar quotes from college leaders of their experience of utilising these competencies in response to the challenges of the pandemic.

The way in which leadership competencies identified in this research map to the Inner Development Goals is represented in the following:

College Leadership Competencies during the pandemic mapped to the Inner Development Goals

Being
Relationship to self

Empathy	Openness
Resilience	Adaptability
Integrity	Self-reflection
Authenticity	Self-belief
Positivity	Confidence

Collaborating
Social skills

'Soft' leadership approach	Recognising individual strengths
Inclusivity	Mobilising resources
Supportive relationships	Co-creation of skills

Acting
Driving change

Agile leadership	Being goal-oriented
Visible leadership	Creative solutions
Putting staff and students first	Building capabilities
Decision-making	Delegating effectively

Thinking
Cognitive skills

Outcomes-focused	Thinking as an influencer
Complexity awareness	Reflecting
Knowledge and understanding	Critical thinking
Sense making	Long-term orientation and visioning

Relating
Caring for others and the world

Human focus	Providing reassurance
Listening	Appreciation
Emotional intelligence	Building trust
Open and honest communication	

Inner Development Goals

- **Being** — Relationship to self
- **Thinking** — Cognitive skills
- **Acting** — Driving change
- **Collaborating** — Social skills
- **Relating** — Caring for others and the world

5.1 Being
Relationship to self

Cultivating our inner life and developing and deepening our relationship to our thoughts, feelings and body help us be present, intentional and non-reactive when we face complexity.

- **Inner compass**
  Having a deeply felt sense of responsibility and commitment to values and purposes relating to the good of the whole.

- **Integrity and Authenticity**
  A commitment and ability to act with sincerity, honesty and integrity.

- **Openness and Learning mindset**
  Having a basic mindset of curiosity and a willingness to be vulnerable and embrace change and grow.

- **Self-awareness**
  Ability to be in reflective contact with own thoughts, feelings and desires; having a realistic self-image and ability to regulate oneself.

- **Presence**
  Ability to be in the here and now, without judgement and in a state of open-ended presence.

Leadership competencies identified in this research that map to 'Being' include:

- Empathy
- Resilience
- Integrity
- Authenticity
- Positivity
- Openness
- Adaptability
- Self-reflection
- Self-belief
- Confidence

Being **empathetic** and demonstrating empathy was cited by every interviewee who took part in the research. This competency was often related to a leadership approach that had a 'human' focus and putting staff and student safety and well-being at the forefront of strategic decision making. Leaders referred to empathy as being a necessary leadership competency under normal circumstances but reported that from the very start of the pandemic they were required to rely on this quality more. As one leader commented:

> 'Students have families too – we needed to recognise that and the challenges it brings for them when, for example, the college nursery is closed and their children are at home. Showing empathy was key.'

Resilience was another competency identified by every leader interviewed. Resilience was related to having to make decisions under pressure in the context of Covid-19 restrictions and guidelines changing rapidly throughout the period of the pandemic. Leaders reported not always having the answers to the immediate challenges but moving forward as a leadership team with the guidance and data that was available at the time, safe in the knowledge that they were doing their best for their college communities (inner compass; presence):

> 'You have to be resilient. Our job is to cope with high pressure and take the correct decisions. We don't always get it right so you have to be able to switch off too and not dwell on things.'

Integrity was a core leadership competency cited by many interviewees. Integrity was often mentioned along with being authentic (anther competency identified) and in relation to having 'open' and 'honest' conversations about the challenge posed by the pandemic (integrity and

authenticity). Positivity was another competency deemed to come into its own as the pandemic took hold. Maintaining a positive belief that the leadership team would be able to cope with the challenges that lay ahead in the move from face-to-face to online learning as collages closed down for lockdown, was seen as essential. **Positivity** was also mentioned in relation to interactions with managers and in terms of communication with the staff and students about how the leadership were addressing the challenges of the pandemic. Being **able to adapt** to whatever challenges the pandemic brought for the leadership team was also seen as a core leadership competency. Interviewees reported that the ability to adapt would be a key competency moving forward in the context of new working arrangements in the hybrid/blended learning 'new normal.'

Having the ability to be **reflective** was another core competency identified by college leaders. Interviewees spoke of the necessity to both reflect as a leadership team in terms of decision-making and new arrangements but also to engage in self-reflection as a leader:

> 'Self-reflection is important. Reflection is particularly important in times of change. You have to think about how you might have done things differently, to learn and influence future decision-making.'

Having **self-belief** and **self-confidence** were two related competencies cited by leaders as having contributed positively to their ability to respond to the pandemic. Self-belief was deemed to require confidence and relates to the IDG of self-awareness. Confidence was related to knowledge of both the business of the college and of staff role sand personalities:

> 'Self-belief comes for knowing who you are leading, what drives and motivates them, what they are skilled in and, therefore, what to delegate to whom.'

While 'presence' was not explicitly referenced by interviews, the idea of **presence** was implicit in responses to questions around key leadership competencies. For example, in response to the question about how the college leadership team might contribute to an imagined positive future, post-pandemic:

> 'By encouraging and nurturing forward thinking, keeping our "finger on the pulse".'

The table below maps the leadership competencies that relate to the IDG of 'Being' with further quotes providing definitions and examples of leadership competencies in action.

Inner Development Goals: Being

Skills and Qualities	College Leadership Competencies	Exemplar quotes by competency
Inner compass Integrity and Authenticity Openness and Learning mindset Self-awareness Presence	Empathy Resilience Integrity Authenticity Positivity Openness Adaptability Self-reflection Self-belief Confidence	**Empathy:** Showing empathy means being able to set aside the business directive and focus on you community. It's about concern for humans. In our case staff and students; helping people understand their own personal experiences and how these impact on their work or studies. **Resilience:** Resilience involves being able to cope with whatever is being thrown at you no matter how difficult it is, whether you have the answers there and then. **Integrity:** Integrity is about recognising and acknowledging we're all human with jobs to do but that we're not exempt from the challenges of the outside world. **Authenticity:** Authenticity means not hiding from difficult decisions or communications that are coming out. **Positivity:** You can't let your managers see that you're panicking too, like a swan on the surface but underneath furiously paddling. **Openness:** We had to reassure staff and students that the situation wasn't perfect but that we'd get through it together and that we're all human. **Adaptability:** I encouraged colleagues to find time for themselves each working day so that they could adapt to working from home. I encouraged them to go for a daily walk and told them I was doing so myself. I also had to accept that I couldn't expect emails responses by return. Even now I continue to ask my managers, what are you doing to unwind? Switching off during a crisis is hard. We all need to adapt to the new normal. **Self-reflection:** We had a constant focus on what was working, what wasn't and what we needed to do to change. **Self-belief:** Leading means having the ability to work under pressure on multiple tasks to multiple (and conflicting) deadlines. Self-belief in a crisis was what it was all about. **Confidence:** You have to be solutions and future focussed, calm in the face of adversity, organised, pragmatic and have confidence in your decision making.

5.2 Thinking
Cognitive skills

Developing our cognitive skills by taking different perspectives, evaluating information and making sense of the world as an interconnected whole is essential for wise decision-making.

- **Critical thinking**
  Skills in critically reviewing the validity of views, evidence and plans.

- **Complexity awareness**
  Understanding of and skills in working with complex and systemic conditions and causalities.

- **Perspective skills**
  Skills in seeking, understanding and actively making use of insights from contrasting perspectives.

- **Sense-making**
  Skills in seeing patterns, structuring the unknown and being able to consciously create stories.

- **Long-term orientation and Visioning**
  Long-term orientation and ability to formulate and sustain commitment to visions relating to the larger context.

Leadership competencies identified in this research that map to 'Thinking' include:

- Being outcomes focused
- Complexity awareness
- Knowledge and understanding
- Sense-making
- Thinking as an influencer
- Reflecting
- Critical thinking
- Long-term orientation and visioning

Being **outcomes-focused** was a competency deemed by leaders as being especially necessary during the pandemic and relates to the 'Being' IDG of inner compass - having a deeply felt sense of responsibility and commitment to values and purposes relating to the good of the whole. The focus for all leaders interviewed, following ensuring student and staff safety and well-being was about delivering the best possible student experience online. Being outcomes-focused meant leaders were in a position to take the 'big' decision individually and as a team about what needed to happen and what resources needed to be mobilised to ensure the continuity delivery.

Complexity awareness (also an IDG) came to the fore during the pandemic for college leaders and their teams. Critical Incident Plans were developed as the pandemic started so that every element of college business was addressed in terms of continuity planning and review. This competency was often cited with reference to both '**collaboration'** (another competency) and being data-driven:

> 'The situation was complex and evolving. We took a strategic and evidenced-based approach to planning and decision making. It required an ability to take a helicopter view.'

Having a knowledge and understanding of the college sector as whole and how the system operates in the Scottish policy context as well as in practice allowed leaders to deal with the complexity of the challenges faced during the pandemic. Issues around student engagement, equity and quality control, school-college partnerships and relationships with employers and other stakeholders, for example, had to be considered along with numerous other concerns. Knowledge and understanding of the sector and the college backed up by being in possession the necessary data, allowed leaders to make sense of the emerging situation of the pandemic. **Sense-making**, therefore, was very much in evidence as a core competency for leaders during the pandemic:

'We didn't know what was coming next or how different people were going to react to change so we had to make sense of changes (new guidance) and interpret change and its impact quickly then communicate it effectively.'

Thinking as an influencer was identified by interviewees a core leadership competency which also relates to the IDG of 'Acting' (e.g. 'courage') as well as to other competencies such as self-belief, self-confidence and being outcomes focused:

'Thinking like you can influence, being an influencer. That's part of the role of a leader. It's not enough just to plod along in leading a college; you have to have an eye on enhancement and take steps to improve things for our students.'

Reflecting is another core competency deemed to be important both during the pandemic and moving forward. Reflecting corresponds to all five of the elements of the IDG of 'Thinking'. Of course, reflective practice is a leadership competency that is well established. However, leaders reported that engaging in reflection during the pandemic was especially important as teaching and learning moved from mostly face-to-face delivery to the online environment and staff began working from home. Gathering data about effective practice informed such reflection and decision making moving forward:

'Reflective practice really came into its own during the pandemic. We were constantly checking to see what was working and what wasn't working so well and feeding back and changing and improving delivery. We used student surveys for this and dialogue with staff.'

Critical thinking was a competency participant identified as both aiding their own ability to lead during the pandemic and as a competency required collectively for leadership teams. Critical thinking during the pandemic was often translated into the development of Critical Incident Plans to aid strategic planning and to allow the delegation of tasks, identify and mobilise the necessary resources and digital training:

'This prior preparation and (critical incident) planning made a significant difference to the College's response, setting a strong foundation.'

Long-term visioning was another competency that maps directly to the 'Thinking' IDG and is another competency that leaders identified as being crucial to the strategic direction of the college moving forward:

'We had to make the College ready for whatever was coming and not just in the short-term.'

'Recognising immediate need for action but keeping a focus on the future and the post-pandemic environment.'

The table below maps the leadership competencies that relate to the IDG of 'Thinking' with further (expanded) quotes providing definitions and examples of leadership competencies in action.

Inner Development Goals: Thinking

Skills and Qualities	College Leadership Competencies	Exemplar quotes by competency
Critical thinking Complexity awareness Perspective skills Sense-making Long-term orientation and Visioning	Being outcomes focused Complexity awareness Knowledge and understanding Sense-making Thinking as an influencer Reflecting Critical thinking Long-term orientation and Visioning	**Being outcomes-focused:** The focus has to be on our students and delivering for them. During the pandemic this meant developing new ways of working and doing things. **Complexity awareness:** The situation was complex and evolving. We took a strategic and evidenced-based approach to planning and decision-making. It required an ability to take a helicopter view. **Knowledge and understanding:** What helped me was my knowledge and understanding of how the whole system works and the ability to know where to get support and guidance when I don't know. Your agility and creativity comes to the fore as a result during crisis. You become a polymath in this role. **Sense-making:** We didn't know what was coming next or how different people were going to react to change so we had to make sense of changes (new guidance) and interpret change and its impact quickly then communicate it effectively. **Thinking as an influencer:** Thinking like you can influence, being an influencer. That's part of the role of a leader. It's not enough just to plod along in leading a college; you have to have an eye on enhancement and take steps to improve things for our students. **Reflecting:** Reflective practice really came into its own during the pandemic. We were constantly checking to see what was working and what wasn't working so well and feeding back and changing and improving delivery. We used student surveys for this and dialogue with staff. **Critical thinking:** We developed a Critical Incident Plan to outline how to close campuses, how to deliver remote working and how to reopen campuses. The Plan was developed in late February / early March 2020 and put the College ahead of the lockdown. This prior preparation and planning made a significant difference to the College's response, setting a strong foundation. **Long-term orientation and visioning:** We had to make the College ready for whatever was coming and not just in the short-term. I set tasks and allocated these to senior staff. This resulted in staff feeling in control of their areas and empowered them to act. This meant the College was not dependent on one or two individuals for direction but had the engagement of the whole college leadership team.

5.3 Relating
Caring for others and the World

Appreciating, caring for and feeling connected to others, such as neighbours, future generations or the biosphere, helps us create more just and sustainable systems and societies for everyone.

- **Appreciation**
  Relating to others and to the world with a basic sense of appreciation, gratitude and joy.

- **Connectedness**
  Having a keen sense of being connected with and/or being a part of a larger whole, such as a community, humanity or global ecosystem.

- **Humility**
  Being able to act in accordance with the needs of the situation without concern for one's own importance.

- **Empathy and Compassion**
  Ability to relate to others, oneself and nature with kindness, empathy and compassion and address related suffering.

Leadership competencies identified in this research that map to 'Relating' include:

- Human focus/compassion
- Listening
- Emotional intelligence
- Open and honest communication
- Providing reassurance
- Appreciation
- Building trust

Having a **human focus** was a leadership competency that was referenced positively in response to several of the questions posed in the research. The supportive and empathetic nature of leadership was referenced both in terms of the leadership team's response to the pandemic as well as being a competency that leaders felt was important they demonstrated in their own leadership. The term '**compassion'** was often use interchangeably or alongside 'human focus' and a human focus was seen to involve empathy (relates to the IDG of Being).

> '**You have to be supportive, empathetic and show compassion. Ultimately, it's about the human touch. It goes with leadership.'**

> '**It's about having a human focus. We had to momentarily set aside the business directive and focus on our community - show concern for staff and students to help people understand their own personal experiences and how these impact their work or studies.'**

Having a human focus was deemed to facilitate obtaining staff buy in and bringing teams together as well as providing reassurance that the leadership team was on top of the situation:

> '**We had to reassure people that, while the situation wasn't perfect that we'd get through it, that we were all in it together and that we're all human.'**

> '**A key question to ask of our managers was ' 'how can we support you to support others?'**

The human touch was also referenced with respect to moving forward post-pandemic:

> '**People's reaction to hybrid working will be interesting. Some staff are actually quite anxious. We need to show the human touch here too.'**

Listening was a further essential competency identified by leaders under the IDG of 'Relating' but which can also be seen to map to 'Collaborating' in terms of communication skills. Listening relates to having an empathic approach and showing appreciation for staff:

> **'Leadership is about listening not just hearing; understanding and being seen to understand the challenges for staff.'**

Again, related to the competency of empathy and the IDG of 'Relating', some research participants made specific reference to **emotional intelligence** as a core leadership competency. Emotional intelligence was defined in terms of being able to read people:

> **'It's about being attentive to your colleagues, being able to channel and read between the lines about what they're really saying or not saying.'**

Engaging in **open and honest communication** with staff was viewed as essential part of leaders' response to the pandemic and its associated challenges. This competency, which clearly maps closely to the IDG of 'Relating', was deemed necessary on a number of fronts including fostering trust and empowering staff as well as having the potential to contribute to staff well-being:

> **'Open and honest communication builds trust, empowers people, makes people feel involved and listened to, build confidence and buys you goodwill, helps with people's wellbeing. Communication within the college is very open now, much more open than it was before.'**

Demonstrating **appreciation** (maps directly to the IDG of 'Relating') was another skill identified by participants as a core leadership competency that came to the fore during the pandemic:

> **'There was much more checking in on people in general and more getting people together. We encouraged everyone to check in so that we could provide every reassurance we were being proactive and that we understood and appreciated their challenges; that we'd get through this together.'**

A final competency identified by leaders under the IDG of 'Relating' was **building trust**. Again, this competency was seen as essential in terms of moving forward post-pandemic as well as in their leadership team's response to the pandemic:

> **'Moving to working from home and working digitally has been a massive shift in terms of managing expectations. We needed to show that we had trust in our staff, that we trusted them to work from home and to manage home-schooling, for example.'**

The table below maps the leadership competencies that relate to the IDG of 'Relating' with further (expanded) quotes providing definitions and examples of leadership competencies in action.

Inner Development Goals: Relating

Skills and Qualities	College Leadership Competencies	Exemplar quotes by competency
Appreciation Connectedness Humility Empathy and Compassion	Human focus/compassion Listening Emotional intelligence Open and honest communication Providing reassurance Appreciation Building trust	**Human focus/compassion:** As a leader you have to understand who you are leading. This requires a personal connection so that you can understand what drives and motivates your staff. I did this by facilitating informal discussion, which we were missing not being together on campus, and by bringing people from different campuses together online. **Listening:** Leadership is about listening not just hearing; understanding and being seen to understand the challenges for staff. Working from home and home-schooling in particular, posed huge challenges for many. **Emotional intelligence:** Leaders need to be able to try to read situations. It's about being attentive to your colleagues, being able to channel and read between the lines about what they're really saying or not saying. **Open and honest communication:** Open and honest communication builds trust, empowers people, makes people feel involved and listened to, build confidence and buys you goodwill, helps with people's wellbeing. Communication within the college is very open now, much more open than it was before. **Providing reassurance:** We reassured staff that we would find solutions even if we didn't have them now. It was about how to answer the, 'What on earth are we going to do now?' questions in a way that provided reassurance that we'd get though it and find solutions. To do this you have to have empathy and understand how staff and students are feeling. **Appreciation:** There was much more checking in on people in general and more getting people together. We encouraged everyone to check in so that we could provide every reassurance we were being proactive and that we understood and appreciated their challenges; that we'd get through this together. **Building trust:** Moving to working from home and working digitally has been a massive shift in terms of managing expectations. We needed to show that we had trust in our staff, that we trusted them to work from home and to manage home-schooling, for example.

5.4 Collaborating
Social skills

To make progress on shared concerns, we need to develop our abilities to include, hold space and communicate with stakeholders with different values, skills and competencies.

- **Communication skills**
  Ability to really listen to others, to foster genuine dialogue, to advocate own views skilfully, to manage conflicts constructively and to adapt communication to diverse groups.

- **Co-creation skills**
  Skills and motivation to build, develop and facilitate collaborative relationships with diverse stake-holders, characterized by psychological safety and genuine co-creation.

- **Inclusive mindset and intercultural competence**
  Willingness and competence to embrace diversity and include people and collectives with different views and backgrounds.

- **Trust**
  Ability to show trust and to create and maintain trusting relationships.

- **Mobilisation skills**
  Skills in inspiring and mobilising others to engage in shared purposes.

Leadership competencies identified in this research that map to 'Collaborating' include:

- 'Soft' leadership approach
- Inclusivity
- Supportive relationships
- Recognising individual strengths
- Mobilising resources
- Co-creation of skills

Adopting a 'soft' leadership approach was defined by participants as engaging in more **collaboration** with colleagues than was the case pre-pandemic and relates to the competency of having a human focus. Interviewees described this competency in terms of 'leading not managing'. One interview described his own personal shift in collaborating with colleagues as being , 'Less of the sage on the stage and more of the guide on the side.' A more 'soft' leadership approach was deemed to involve more listening, greater inclusivity in terms of feedback and decision-making, building trust and a focus on the co-creation of skills:

> 'We needed to show that we were 'in with the troops,' being alongside and being supportive and proactive instead of "controlling" or "managing".'

Leaders reported a shift in terms of greater collaboration and inclusivity in general within their respective colleges as a result of the pandemic, as well as supportive college Boards and enhanced collaboration across colleges within their regions and nationally as well as with other stakeholders. The competency of inclusivity maps directly to the IDG of 'Collaborating' in terms of inclusive mindset and intercultural competence:

> 'We have an effective relationship between our executive team, a very supportive regional board and an excellent leadership team dynamic that is inclusive - regular whole-team meetings, clear programme and project management approach adopted ensuring effective distribution of responsibilities, excellent levels of trust and respect, highly supportive and empowering, very clear commitment to highly visible communication.'

Encouraging **supportive relationships** was another competency that can be viewed as corresponding to 'Collaboration'. 'Support' was a

word often cited in the research dataset and was variously related to staff, students, other leadership team members and external stakeholders such as schools, employers and other organisations. Supportive relationships enabled enhance communication and inter-team collaboration:

> ❝ 'The pandemic was an opportunity to force changing the norm and to have more meetings to keep the flow of information going up and down the way. This broke down some of the barriers and helped us to address concerns. So, we started connecting more as a team through supportive relationships.'

In order to manage the challenges posed by the pandemic, leaders had to **recognise the individual strengths of their colleagues** in order to delegate tasks and areas of responsibility which aids the mobilisation of skills:

> ❝ 'As a leader you need to connect with each individual on their own. Some people are very task based while others are more touchy feely. You have to recognise this, especially during a crisis, and help them to work to their strengths by delegating certain areas of responsibility.'

Collaborating is also evident in the competency identified as mobilising skills which could also come under the IDG of 'Acting.' Similarly, the competency 'co-creation of skills' could fall within the 'Acting' IDG but clearly involves a significant element of Collaborating as well as Relating. Skills in inspiring and mobilising others to engage in shared purposes was cited by leaders as core competency and related also to being outcomes focused and having a long-term vision for the college post-pandemic:

> ❝ 'We installed a campus operations steering group with representation from all areas including the senior leadership team, estates, student support, the unions and so on. All the key people collaborated in an inclusive way. This kind of collaboration was a cultural change which still exists to an extent.'

Co-creation skills were very much in evidence as a core competency necessary to tackle the challenges posed by the pandemic, according to interviewees. Skills and motivation to build, develop and facilitate collaborative relationships with diverse stakeholders, characterised by a focus on shared goals and genuine concern for the student experience encouraged collaborative solutions based on reflective practice and evaluation of the available data:

> ❝ 'The team that I lead have evaluated the units we deliver and how we do it. We have found new approaches and participated in training to make sure that we have the skills to deliver fully online when necessary.'

The table below maps the leadership competencies that relate to the IDG of 'Collaborating' with further quotes providing definitions and examples of leadership competencies in action.

Inner Development Goals: Collaborating

Skills and Qualities	College Leadership Competencies	Exemplar quotes by competency
Communication skills Co-creation skills Inclusive mindset and intercultural competence Trust Mobilisation skills	'Soft' leadership approach Inclusivity Supportive relationships Recognising individual strengths Mobilizing resources Co-creation of skills	**'Soft' leadership approach:** We needed to show that we were 'in with the troops,' being alongside and being supportive and proactive instead of 'controlling' or 'managing.' **Inclusivity:** We have an effective relationship between our executive team and the very supportive regional board and an excellent leadership team dynamic that is inclusive - regular whole-team meetings, clear programme and project management approach adopted ensuring effective distribution of responsibilities, excellent levels of trust and respect, highly supportive and empowering, very clear commitment to highly visible communication. **Supportive relationships:** The pandemic was an opportunity to force changing the norm and to have more meetings to keep the flow of information going up and down the way. This broke down some of the barriers and helped us to address concerns. So, we started connecting more as a team through supportive relationships. **Recognising individual strengths:** As a leader you need to connect with each individual on their own. Some people are very task based while others are more touchy feely. You have to recognise this, especially during a crisis, and help them to work to their strengths by delegating certain areas of responsibility. **Mobilisation skills:** We installed a campus operations steering group with representation from all areas including the senior leadership team, estates, student support, the unions and so on. All the key people collaborated in an inclusive way. This kind of collaboration was a cultural change which still exists to an extent. **Co-creation skills:** The team that I lead have evaluated the units we deliver and how we do it. We have found new approaches and participated in training to make sure that we have the skills to deliver fully online when necessary. We had a full year where we taught online and over that time we completely overhauled our materials, assessments and delivery approaches. We are now confident to deliver in a variety of ways.

5.5 Acting
Driving change

Qualities such as courage and optimism help us acquire true agency, break old patterns, generate original ideas and act with persistence in uncertain times.

- **Courage**
  Ability to stand up for values, make decisions, take decisive action and, if need be, challenge and disrupt existing structures and views.

- **Creativity**
  Ability to generate and develop original ideas, innovate and being willing to disrupt conventional patterns.

- **Optimism**
  Ability to sustain and communicate a sense of hope, positive attitude and confidence in the possibility of meaningful change.

- **Perseverance**
  Ability to sustain engagement and remain determined and patient even when efforts take a long time to bear fruit.

Leadership competencies identified in this research that map to 'Acting' include:

- Agile leadership
- Visible leadership
- Putting staff and students first
- Decision-making
- Being data driven
- Being goal oriented
- Creative solutions
- Building capabilities
- Delegating effectively

The word '**agile**' was frequently used by research participants to describe the aspects of their leadership team's response to the pandemic that worked. In the face of the disruption caused to normal college business, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, leaders has to respond quickly and take decisions in the context of a changing situation in the absence of sector specific guidance:

> ❝ '**I could see that some colleagues and indeed some organisations seemed to be paralysed. So, I reached out to an awarding body to suggest collaborating on how best we could work together to ensure we kept our students engaged and that we had the appropriate quality mechanisms in place to be able to deliver online.**'

Another feature contributing to the successful college response to the pandemic was **visible leadership**. This competency can be seen to relate to the 'Acting' IDG (courage, optimism and perseverance):

> ❝ '**We were on a "corona coaster" – our college community was a disrupted place. It wasn't just about leading, it was about being seen to have leadership. That way we kept everyone with us and we could work together to respond positively organisationally.**'

The starting point, in terms of 'Acting' to respond to the challenges of the pandemic was putting staff and students first:

> ❝ '**The purposeful and student centric approach adopted was at the core of everything we did; everyone (not just senior staff) really have gone above and beyond to support our students and each other.**'

Decision-making that was goal oriented and data driven (which could be viewed as there independent but linked competencies) was another factor deemed to have aided the leadership response to the pandemic that maps directly to 'Acting' and driving change:

'Decisive decision-making was crucial, especially in the face of government guidelines being absent, delayed, unclear or changing within the context of a large flow of information.'

'To have the agility to be able to respond we had to be data driven. That's not something new in our area of business. We're used to it. So, we took the same approach to the pandemic.'

Coming up with **creative solutions** to the problems faced during the pandemic was cited as a key leadership competency in this research. The innovative examples of providing support, developing new ideas and ways of working included everything for time-tabling to developing an online café for staff and students, to members of staff driving round delivering laptops to students.

Sometimes the innovation involved bring the entire college community together to create effective solutions:

'At the beginning we were losing touch organisationally. So, we held an event that included over 400 staff. It was a moment of real creative thinking for us as a college. It was about involving everyone in decision making to co-design our future college.'

Building capabilities for online delivery was a key focus of the leadership response to the pandemic and one that participants deemed a competency. Engaging in delivering more coaching, mentoring and continuing professional development were also included in descriptions of how leaders tackled developing the skills and capabilities required to respond to the challenges of the pandemic. The capacity to build capabilities enabled leaders to support staff in the pivot to online delivery and was referenced as being a priority for hybrid working and learning moving forward:

'Staff and student capabilities have improved. Devices for delivering in a blended way have been provided to staff. Students have access to resources to give them access to online learning. Blended learning is now current practice with hybrid coming more to the fore.'

The capacity to **delegate effectively** was another competency seen as a necessary driver of change in response to the pandemic. This competency relates to being outcomes focus (Thinking) and recognising individual strengths (Collaborating).

'Our agile approach to workstreams involved smaller less hierarchical workgroups, recognising individual strengths and building teams that are fully empowered to undertake delegated tasks.'

The table below maps the leadership competencies that relate to the IDG of 'Acting' with further quotes providing definitions and examples of leadership competencies in action.

Inner Development Goals: Acting

Skills and Qualities	College Leadership Competencies	Exemplar quotes by competency
Courage Creativity Optimism Perseverance	Agile leadership Visible leadership Putting staff and students first Decision making Being data driven Being goal oriented Building capabilities Creative solutions Delegating effectively	**Agile leadership:** We formed a crisis leadership group and managed all decisions through this group so that decision could be disseminated quickly and effectively. This led to action groups who were tasked with implementing change. We kept a log of decisions that were being taken. **Visible leadership:** Leadership has to be visible. It wasn't just about taking the right decisions under pressure We had to be seen to be acting. We did this through communication channels. **Putting staff and students first**: The purposeful and student centric approach adopted was at the core of everything we did; everyone (not just senior staff) really have gone above and beyond to support our students and each other. **Decision making:** Decisive decision making was crucial, especially in the face of government guidelines being absent, delayed, unclear or changing within the context of a large flow of information. **Being data-driven:** To have the agility to be able to respond we had to be data driven. That's not something new in our area of business. We're used to it. So, we took the same approach to the pandemic. **Being goal oriented:** I think being goal orientated really helped me as a leader during this time. When staff felt overwhelmed I was able to reduce the noise, allocate achievable tasks and remind everyone of the skills, opportunities and experience we were gaining. **Building capabilities:** Staff and student capabilities have improved. Devices for delivering in a blended way have been provided to staff. Students have access to resources to give them access to online learning. Blended learning is now current practice with hybrid coming more to the fore. **Creative solutions:** We had to adapt and become creative with timetabling and how we were going to provide student and staff support online. **Delegating effectively:** Ability to delegate effectively, methodical (project management-based approach) to task allocation, willingness to take decisions, ability to hold people to account (constructively), confidence in my own standards, knowledge and skills - ability to explain "what good looks like.

6. CONCLUSIONS

There can be no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic generated unprecedented challenges for Scotland's colleges and their leadership teams as they did for every part of society. The experiences of college leaders who contributed to this research reflect a sector that mobilised an impressive adaptive response to the challenges posed. At the start of the pandemic, the two main areas of concern were ensuring staff and student safety, health and well-being and how to deliver online learning. Ensuring that staff and students were safe and felt safe so that students could complete their studies was a top priority. Carefully planned, effective communication with staff and students was necessary from the outset and remained an essential feature of a leadership response that was deemed to work well throughout the pandemic.

A systems approach to leadership is evident in the way in which college leaders devised Critical Incident Plans that set out key actions that were within the college's control in the face of much uncertainty. Every aspect of college business was reflected in these plans from communication strategies to delegating tasks to lead staff, establishing and testing remote systems access and quality controls, and planning and delivering staff development.

In the pivot from largely face-to-face to online delivery, supporting staff to ensure student success in the online environment was paramount. Developing and enhancing digital capabilities was prioritised and planned to ensure that staff and students had the digital capabilities to work from home. Ensuring engaging content was still being delivered, monitoring attendance for students and designing a range of new online assessments were cited as examples of concerns around digital capabilities, as well as ensuring access to the necessary resources for staff and students to enable online delivery and connectivity in remote areas of the region. Digital poverty was also a significant challenge and one that was uppermost in leaders' minds at the outbreak of the pandemic as they strove to maintain equity. Providing all students with a suitable digital device and Wi-Fi access along with time to adapt teaching content and upskilling staff where required were prioritised amid a rapidly evolving situation and uncertainty.

Already established partnerships and alliances between schools, colleges, universities, employers and other agencies were utilised and enhanced to address the challenges of the pandemic. Leaders reported that the online working environment meant that college Principals and senior leaders were better able to come together more frequently than they had done pre-pandemic. The impetus for this evolved from the uncertainty in the sector, particularly at the onset of the crisis although enhanced inter-college and cross-sectoral communication and collaboration is said to be continuing as part of the 'new normal'. Leaders wish to see a continued emphasis on cross-college partnerships and enhanced sectoral engagement

Respondents valued their leadership team's pragmatic and purposeful approach to change management and their focus on staff and student safety, health and well-being. The fact that leadership teams took a proactive and solutions-based, partnership and team approach to the challenges posed by the pandemic was valued along with realistic expectations about what could be achieved. Key features of responsiveness included delineating clear roles which were

clearly communicated and visible, and leaders being decisive in terms of addressing issues as these arose. A collaborative approach to decision making was also deemed important. Effective communication was reported to build trust, make people feel listened to, involved, empowered, helps contribute to people's well-being and buys leaders goodwill. Trust was another aspect of leadership that was seen as contributing positively to the response to the pandemic. Trusting and supporting staff to perform their roles in an entirely new context was said to build cohesiveness within teams. A key feature of trust was empathy.

The picture emerging now as a result of the leadership response to the pandemic is one that encompasses clear and effective policies, procedures and processes that are embedded in new systems designed to deliver online and blended learning. The agile and responsive leadership approach is reported to have increased staff and student confidence, resilience and digital capabilities where homeworking and remote learning and teaching are part of the 'new hybrid normal.' Of course, challenges remain; IT resources shortages are improving but remain a challenge and consistent interpretation of guidelines in different settings is still challenging, for example.

Looking forward, college leaders wish to see the current strategic direction of their college continuing. This direction was reported to involve an agile, flexible approach to delivery that harnesses the best aspects of a blended and hybrid approach. Leaders want to continue to develop the culture of leadership support for staff and students that had been enhanced since the onset of the pandemic; one that includes staff being supported to actively contribute to the success of the college. College leaders wish to build on the collegiate working relationships and partnerships developed or enhanced through the experience of the pandemic. A structured approach to risk-taking, evidence based decision-making, financial investment and collaboration with other colleges and partners were seen as being required for such an approach to be effective. Responsiveness in terms of learners' needs and workforce demands were cited as being fundamental to an imaged future for college leadership. A blended and hybrid leaning experience were viewed as forming the core elements of the college of the future. Developing college leadership for the future was deemed to involve a focus on leadership skills development, collaborative and collective goal setting and allowing staff greater autonomy in decision-making. A culture of empowerment also formed part of an imagined positive future.

The findings from this research demonstrate that, despite the significant challenges posed to college leadership during the pandemic, effective leadership encompasses a systems approach that includes agility, responsiveness, a solutions-focused, evidence-based, response to strategic planning, and decision-making that and builds trust, involves all stakeholders and includes cross-sectoral engagement. While it is recognised that these leadership factors have long been known, evidence from this research validates their efficacy in terms of college leaders' experience of and response to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This research identifies a set of core leadership competencies exhibited by college leaders during the pandemic that map to the IDGs of being and thinking, and behaviours around relating to and collaborating with others to act to enable an effective response. Being resilient meant remaining calm and positive when, at the onset of the pandemic, the operational landscape was changing rapidly and leadership decisions had to be taken relatively quickly. Leaders referenced requiring empathy and emotional intelligence to be able to be supportive of colleagues alongside an ability for self-reflection. Having integrity and being authentic in communications with staff and other stakeholders meant active listening,

being available, being open, realistic, flexible and adaptable about expectations. Remaining positive and having the ability to adapt to a changing situation was enabled by the personal capacity for self-belief and self-confidence to multi-task and manage change.

'Thinking' competencies reported by leaders as helping them to manage their ability to respond included an awareness of the complexity of the situation as it applied to maintaining a business critical approach. Sense-making in this context was aligned with an understanding of how colleges work and an awareness of the need to work with all stakeholders across both the college and the sector. Reflecting on what was working and what elements of the response were not working so well, and thinking critically about what therefore needed to happen, was enhanced by thinking as an influencer and having a long-term vision based on evidence and strategic priorities. Relating to colleagues and key stakeholders throughout the challenges of the pandemic involved having

compassion and a 'human focus' which was seen to involve empathy and emotional intelligence, listening, being open and honest, and providing reassurance to staff and students. Showing appreciation for the lengths staff were going to in order to continue to deliver an engaging student experience online was deemed essential and built trust in relationships.

Competencies relating to collaborating included a 'soft' leadership approach that was inclusive and supportive and that recognised individual strengths. Skills in inspiring and mobilising others to engage in shared purposes were cited by leaders as core competencies required of them as leaders to delegate tasks and areas of responsibility to facilitate change. Leadership competencies identified in this research that map to the IDG of 'Acting' include agile and visible leadership, putting staff and students first, being data-driven and solutions-focused to enable creative solutions, and effective decision-making. Delegating effectively and building staff and student capabilities were

also cited as leadership competencies that facilitated an effective response to the pandemic.

It is clear, therefore, that the IDGs should be used as framework for future college leadership development. It is important that the IDGs are embedded within college leadership programmes and that these are included in all staff development so that the sector is able to benefit from developing leaders at all levels. Leaders who have developed IDGs will be enabled to work towards the Sustainable Development Goals for the sort of adaptive, collaborative leadership prescribed in the Coherence and Sustainability agenda. Focusing leadership development on the IDG framework also has the potential to embed sustainability within college delivery and to develop the coherent, responsive and sustainable system Scotland's colleges have signed up to College Sector Statement of Ambition 2021 – 2026, for the benefit of all stakeholders.

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APPENDIX 1. SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR COLLEGE LEADERS

From a college leadership perspective:

1. What happened when the pandemic started and what is the situation now?

2. What do you value most about the leadership team's response to the pandemic?

3. What are the core leadership factors that have made/are making the response effective?

4. Is there one aspect of the leadership response that has worked particularly well?

5. What are the features that make it effective?

6. How do you know?

7. Imagine it is three years into the future and the staff and student experience is just as you would want it to be…what's happening that makes the experience successful?

8. What does it look like?

9. What has changed and how has the leadership team contributed to this future?

10. What has stayed the same?

11. What are some of the developments that have been made to get to this future point?

12. What can you stop doing because it no longer serves or gets in the way?

APPENDIX 2. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR COLLEGE LEADERS

From a college leadership perspective:

1. When the pandemic started what were the main areas of concern?

2. What were the key challenges?

3. What is the situation now?

4. What were your priorities when leading during the pandemic?

5. What changes did you have to make to you leadership practice?

6. What personal competencies were most important when leading during the pandemic?

7. How would you define these competencies?

8. Why do you believe these competencies are important?

9. What is an example of this competency in action?

10. Moving forward, in terms of what you have learned, what features do you aim to maintain in your leadership approach?

11. What features of leadership worked less well and will you leave in the past?

APPENDIX 3. INNER DEVELOPMENT GOALS DEFINED

Being
Relationship to self

Cultivating our inner life and developing and deepening our relationship to our thoughts, feelings and body help us be present, intentional and non-reactive when we face complexity.

- **Inner compass**
  Having a deeply felt sense of responsibility and commitment to values and purposes relating to the good of the whole.

- **Integrity and Authenticity**
  A commitment and ability to act with sincerity, honesty and integrity.

- **Openness and Learning mindset**
  Having a basic mindset of curiosity and a willingness to be vulnerable and embrace change and grow.

- **Self-awareness**
  Ability to be in reflective contact with own thoughts, feelings and desires; having a realistic self-image and ability to regulate oneself.

- **Presence**
  Ability to be in the here and now, without judgement and in a state of open-ended presence.

Thinking
Cognitive skills

Developing our cognitive skills by taking different perspectives, evaluating information and making sense of the world as an interconnected whole is essential for wise decision-making.

- **Critical thinking**
  Skills in critically reviewing the validity of views, evidence and plans.

- **Complexity awareness**
  Understanding of and skills in working with complex and systemic conditions and causalities.

- **Perspective skills**
  Skills in seeking, understanding and actively making use of insights from contrasting perspectives.

- **Sense-making**
  Skills in seeing patterns, structuring the unknown and being able to consciously create stories.

- **Long-term orientation and Visioning**
  Long-term orientation and ability to formulate and sustain commitment to visions relating to the larger context.

Relating
Caring for others and the World

Appreciating, caring for and feeling connected to others, such as neighbours, future generations or the biosphere, helps us create more just and sustainable systems and societies for everyone.

- **Appreciation**
  Relating to others and to the world with a basic sense of appreciation, gratitude and joy.

- **Connectedness**
  Having a keen sense of being connected with and/or being a part of a larger whole, such as a community, humanity or global ecosystem.

- **Humility**
  Being able to act in accordance with the needs of the situation without concern for one's own importance.

- **Empathy and Compassion**
  Ability to relate to others, oneself and nature with kindness, empathy and compassion and address related suffering.

Collaborating
Social skills

To make progress on shared concerns, we need to develop our abilities to include, hold space and communicate with stakeholders with different values, skills and competencies.

- **Communication skills**
  Ability to really listen to others, to foster genuine dialogue, to advocate own views skilfully, to manage conflicts constructively and to adapt communication to diverse groups.

- **Co-creation skills**
  Skills and motivation to build, develop and facilitate collaborative relationships with diverse stake-holders, characterized by psychological safety and genuine co-creation.

- **Inclusive mindset and intercultural competence**
  Willingness and competence to embrace diversity and include people and collectives with different views and backgrounds.

- **Trust**
  Ability to show trust and to create and maintain trusting relationships.

- **Mobilisation skills**
  Skills in inspiring and mobilising others to engage in shared purposes.

Acting
Driving change

Qualities such as courage and optimism help us acquire true agency, break old patterns, generate original ideas and act with persistence in uncertain times.

- **Courage**
  Ability to stand up for values, make decisions, take decisive action and, if need be, challenge and disrupt existing structures and views.

- **Creativity**
  Ability to generate and develop original ideas, innovate and being willing to disrupt conventional patterns.

- **Optimism**
  Ability to sustain and communicate a sense of hope, positive attitude and confidence in the possibility of meaningful change.

- **Perseverance**
  Ability to sustain engagement and remain determined and patient even when efforts take a long time to bear fruit.

https://www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org/s/211201_IDG_Report_Full.pdf

APPENDIX 4. COLLEGE LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES DURING THE PANDEMIC MAPPED TO THE SDG INNER DEVELOPMENT GOALS WITH EXEMPLAR QUOTES

Inner Development Goals: Being

Skills and Qualities	College Leadership Competencies	Exemplar quotes by competency
Inner compass Integrity and Authenticity Openness and Learning mindset Self-awareness Presence	Empathy Resilience Integrity Authenticity Positivity Openness Adaptability Self-reflection Self-belief Confidence	**Empathy:** Showing empathy means being able to set aside the business directive and focus on you community. It's about concern for humans. In our case staff and students; helping people understand their own personal experiences and how these impact on their work or studies. **Resilience:** Resilience involves being able to cope with whatever is being thrown at you no matter how difficult it is, whether you have the answers there and then. **Integrity:** Integrity is about recognising and acknowledging we're all human with jobs to do but that we're not exempt from the challenges of the outside world. **Authenticity:** Authenticity means not hiding from difficult decisions or communications that are coming out. **Positivity:** You can't let your managers see that you're panicking too, like a swan on the surface but underneath furiously paddling. **Openness:** We had to reassure staff and students that the situation wasn't perfect but that we'd get through it together and that we're all human. **Adaptability:** I encouraged colleagues to find time for themselves each working day so that they could adapt to working from home. I encouraged them to go for a daily walk and told them I was doing so myself. I also had to accept that I couldn't expect emails responses by return. Even now I continue to ask my managers, what are you doing to unwind? Switching off during a crisis is hard. We all need to adapt to the new normal. **Self-reflection:** We had a constant focus on what was working, what wasn't and what we needed to do to change. **Self-belief:** Leading means having the ability to work under pressure on multiple tasks to multiple (and conflicting) deadlines. Self-belief in a crisis was what it was all about. **Confidence:** You have to be solutions and future focussed, calm in the face of adversity, organised, pragmatic and have confidence in your decision making.

Inner Development Goals: Thinking

Skills and Qualities	College Leadership Competencies	Exemplar quotes by competency
Critical thinking Complexity awareness Perspective skills Sense-making Long-term orientation and Visioning	Being outcomes focused Complexity awareness Knowledge and understanding Sense-making Thinking as an influencer Reflecting Critical thinking Long-term orientation and Visioning	**Being outcomes-focused:** The focus has to be on our students and delivering for them. During the pandemic this meant developing new ways of working and doing things. **Complexity awareness:** The situation was complex and evolving. We took a strategic and evidenced-based approach to planning and decision-making. It required an ability to take a helicopter view. **Knowledge and understanding:** What helped me was my knowledge and understanding of how the whole system works and the ability to know where to get support and guidance when I don't know. Your agility and creativity comes to the fore as a result during crisis. You become a polymath in this role. **Sense-making:** We didn't know what was coming next or how different people were going to react to change so we had to make sense of changes (new guidance) and interpret change and its impact quickly then communicate it effectively. **Thinking as an influencer:** Thinking like you can influence, being an influencer. That's part of the role of a leader. It's not enough just to plod along in leading a college; you have to have an eye on enhancement and take steps to improve things for our students. **Reflecting:** Reflective practice really came into its own during the pandemic. We were constantly checking to see what was working and what wasn't working so well and feeding back and changing and improving delivery. We used student surveys for this and dialogue with staff. **Critical thinking:** We developed a Critical Incident Plan to outline how to close campuses, how to deliver remote working and how to reopen campuses. The Plan was developed in late February / early March 2020 and put the College ahead of the lockdown. This prior preparation and planning made a significant difference to the College's response, setting a strong foundation. **Long-term orientation and visioning:** We had to make the College ready for whatever was coming and not just in the short-term. I set tasks and allocated these to senior staff. This resulted in staff feeling in control of their areas and empowered them to act. This meant the College was not dependent on one or two individuals for direction but had the engagement of the whole college leadership team.

Inner Development Goals: Relating

Skills and Qualities	College Leadership Competencies	Exemplar quotes by competency
Appreciation Connectedness Humility Empathy and Compassion	Human focus/compassion Listening Emotional intelligence Open and honest communication Providing reassurance Appreciation Building trust	**Human focus/compassion:** As a leader you have to understand who you are leading. This requires a personal connection so that you can understand what drives and motivates your staff. I did this by facilitating informal discussion, which we were missing not being together on campus, and by bringing people from different campuses together online. **Listening:** Leadership is about listening not just hearing; understanding and being seen to understand the challenges for staff. Working from home and home-schooling in particular, posed huge challenges for many. **Emotional intelligence:** Leaders need to be able to try to read situations. It's about being attentive to your colleagues, being able to channel and read between the lines about what they're really saying or not saying. **Open and honest communication:** Open and honest communication builds trust, empowers people, makes people feel involved and listened to, build confidence and buys you goodwill, helps with people's wellbeing. Communication within the college is very open now, much more open than it was before. **Providing reassurance:** We reassured staff that we would find solutions even if we didn't have them now. It was about how to answer the, 'What on earth are we going to do now?' questions in a way that provided reassurance that we'd get though it and find solutions. To do this you have to have empathy and understand how staff and students are feeling. **Appreciation:** There was much more checking in on people in general and more getting people together. We encouraged everyone to check in so that we could provide every reassurance we were being proactive and that we understood and appreciated their challenges; that we'd get through this together. **Building trust:** Moving to working from home and working digitally has been a massive shift in terms of managing expectations. We needed to show that we had trust in our staff, that we trusted them to work from home and to manage home-schooling, for example.

Inner Development Goals: Collaborating

Skills and Qualities	College Leadership Competencies	Exemplar quotes by competency
Communication skills Co-creation skills Inclusive mindset and intercultural competence Trust Mobilisation skills	'Soft' leadership approach Inclusivity Supportive relationships Recognising individual strengths Mobilizing resources Co-creation of skills	**'Soft' leadership approach:** We needed to show that we were 'in with the troops,' being alongside and being supportive and proactive instead of 'controlling' or 'managing.' **Inclusivity:** We have an effective relationship between our executive team and the very supportive regional board and an excellent leadership team dynamic that is inclusive - regular whole-team meetings, clear programme and project management approach adopted ensuring effective distribution of responsibilities, excellent levels of trust and respect, highly supportive and empowering, very clear commitment to highly visible communication. **Supportive relationships:** The pandemic was an opportunity to force changing the norm and to have more meetings to keep the flow of information going up and down the way. This broke down some of the barriers and helped us to address concerns. So, we started connecting more as a team through supportive relationships. **Recognising individual strengths:** As a leader you need to connect with each individual on their own. Some people are very task based while others are more touchy feely. You have to recognise this, especially during a crisis, and help them to work to their strengths by delegating certain areas of responsibility. **Mobilisation skills:** We installed a campus operations steering group with representation from all areas including the senior leadership team, estates, student support, the unions and so on. All the key people collaborated in an inclusive way. This kind of collaboration was a cultural change which still exists to an extent. **Co-creation skills:** The team that I lead have evaluated the units we deliver and how we do it. We have found new approaches and participated in training to make sure that we have the skills to deliver fully online when necessary. We had a full year where we taught online and over that time we completely overhauled our materials, assessments and delivery approaches. We are now confident to deliver in a variety of ways.

Inner Development Goals: Acting

Skills and Qualities	College Leadership Competencies	Exemplar quotes by competency
Courage Creativity Optimism Perseverance	Agile leadership Visible leadership Putting staff and students first Decision making Being data driven Being goal oriented Building capabilities Creative solutions Delegating effectively	**Agile leadership:** We formed a crisis leadership group and managed all decisions through this group so that decision could be disseminated quickly and effectively. This led to action groups who were tasked with implementing change. We kept a log of decisions that were being taken. **Visible leadership:** Leadership has to be visible. It wasn't just about taking the right decisions under pressure We had to be seen to be acting. We did this through communication channels. **Putting staff and students first**: The purposeful and student centric approach adopted was at the core of everything we did; everyone (not just senior staff) really have gone above and beyond to support our students and each other. **Decision making:** Decisive decision making was crucial, especially in the face of government guidelines being absent, delayed, unclear or changing within the context of a large flow of information. **Being data-driven:** To have the agility to be able to respond we had to be data driven. That's not something new in our area of business. We're used to it. So, we took the same approach to the pandemic. **Being goal oriented:** I think being goal orientated really helped me as a leader during this time. When staff felt overwhelmed I was able to reduce the noise, allocate achievable tasks and remind everyone of the skills, opportunities and experience we were gaining. **Building capabilities:** Staff and student capabilities have improved. Devices for delivering in a blended way have been provided to staff. Students have access to resources to give them access to online learning. Blended learning is now current practice with hybrid coming more to the fore. **Creative solutions:** We had to adapt and become creative with timetabling and how we were going to provide student and staff support online. **Delegating effectively:** Ability to delegate effectively, methodical (project management-based approach) to task allocation, willingness to take decisions, ability to hold people to account (constructively), confidence in my own standards, knowledge and skills - ability to explain "what good looks like.