FE Associates

Impact Report 2025

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Foreword

We partner with further education and skills providers to offer expert insight, collaboration and guidance through our unrivalled network of sector-leading experts. Our specialisms lie in placing, recruiting, developing and advising leaders, and our clients trust us to provide support that drives impact and improvement.

We have been serving the sector since 2004 and over that time have built a reputation founded on expertise, trust and reliability. Our sector-leading position has undoubtedly been achieved through the expertise of our people. It is them that make us stand out.

As we now look to 2026, we are seeking to provide more support to the sector and deliver more impact for our clients. It is therefore apposite to look back over the past year to recognise the achievements of 2025. We are deeply passionate about the sector we serve and our work is firmly grounded in our values. We want to be known as an organisation that delivers on its promises, we are relentless in focusing on the needs of our clients, we are committed to working with a diverse talent base and whatever we do, we want to be the best.

This is our opportunity to demonstrate how we work, the impact we have and how we will continue to maintain our position in the sector we care so deeply for.

Matt Atkinson
Managing Director

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Introduction

2025 was a defining year for further education and skills. Sector leaders navigated funding pressures, evolving policy frameworks and the imperative to deliver transformative outcomes for learners and communities. Against this backdrop of complexity and change, the sector required more than transactional support - it needed strategic partnership, sustained capacity building and excellent leadership that could drive meaningful improvement.

FE Associates exists to meet that need. As a key provider of people-related support services we are committed to putting people first, recognising that institutional excellence is built on strong leadership, capable teams and cultures of continuous improvement. For over two decades, we have worked alongside colleges and training providers to strengthen their capacity, develop their people and navigate moments of critical transition.

Supporting providers across England and Wales through interim leadership, leadership development, executive search, quality improvement and strategic consultancy, our work spanned the breadth of institutional need. From placing interim leaders, to training middle and senior leaders, to successfully appointing leaders and governors across a large number of colleges.

This report captures the breadth and depth of that impact. It details how we enabled institutional stability through interim placements, cultivated the next generation of leaders through structured development programmes, strengthened teaching quality and governance through expert consultancy, and appointed exceptional leaders who will shape the sector's future. It also reflects our commitment to innovation: launching University Leadership Associates to extend our reach into higher education,

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partnering with the Chartered Institution for Further Education to elevate leadership development and introducing FEA-I, a sector specific AI company designed to reduce leadership workload and support data-driven decision-making and institutional improvement.

Every intervention, programme and partnership documented here is underpinned by a singular belief: when you place people first, institutions thrive. When leaders are equipped, supported and empowered, they create environments where staff flourish and learners succeed. That is the impact we seek - and the impact this report demonstrates.



As you read through this report, you will see evidence of sustained partnership, measurable outcomes, and a commitment to the collective good of further education. From the frontline to the boardroom, from emerging leaders to executive appointments, from curriculum transformation to governance reform - our work spans the full ecosystem of institutional capability. And through it all, we remain dedicated to one principle: that investing in people is the surest path to lasting institutional and sector-wide success.

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Our 2025 impact at a glance

- Working with **50** consultants we have supported over **70** interim leadership placements, building institutional capacity and stability across the sector.
- Delivered leadership development programmes to **371** delegates, achieving an average satisfaction score of **4.9** out of **5**.
- Increased the number of permanent leadership search assignments by **19%** and increased applications for permanent roles by **21%**.
- Provided quality improvement services to **31** colleges, delivered by **45** expert consultants.
- Enabled colleges to save over **£170k** in IR35-related costs through our employed interim consultant model.
- Achieved a **73%** return client rate in our leadership recruitment activity.
- Introduced three new leadership programmes to our offering: Executive Leadership Team Development, Leading Authentically and Building Better Business Cases, now core to our offer.
- Advanced sector innovation by partnering with the Chartered Institution for Further Education, launching FEA-I and supporting **25** colleges with their AI strategies and extending our search and recruitment offer to HE through our new brand, University Leadership Associates.
- Maintained a strong commitment to diversity, increasing to **25%** applications from candidates of non-white backgrounds and balanced gender representation in senior appointments.
- Launched our publication on sector CEO wellbeing, **Thriving, Surviving or Nose Diving.**
- Sponsored a number of national awards and charitable initiatives recognising social action, staff and student success.

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Placing people first

Specialist interim leadership support

In 2025, we continued to focus on organisational resilience and stability by placing 50 specialist consultants in over 70 interim placements across the sector. Our interim leaders worked closely with in-house teams to secure improvement, manage change and fill crucial skills gaps. Most importantly our specialists focused on building institutional capacity.

Our placements focused on both strategic and operational leadership roles. Senior curriculum and quality leadership remained a key focus for us and accounted for 54% of placements. We also supported our clients with interim specialists across the full breadth of professional services roles such as MIS, HR, finance, governance, marketing and IT.

Our delivery model combined the strength of our core employed consultant team with the flexibility of our associate network. 43% of our interim activity was delivered by our core employed consultant team. This meant that we were able to save our clients over £170k in additional IR35 related costs due to the employed model that we have in place.

Colleges using FEA permanent consultants saved over £170K in IR35-related costs

Through our consistent focus on leadership, excellence and operational resilience, we reinforced our reputation as a trusted partner to FE institutions - providing immediate support while helping to build the sustainable capacity needed for long-term success.

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Client testimonials

Client Testimonial

“ Just wanted to drop you a quick email to say thank you for setting us up with your consultant for the Information Services review.

She's done an absolutely superb job for us, and I'm delighted with the report she has produced. ”

Chris Todd
Principal and CEO
Derwentside College



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Building the talent pipeline

First class development for sector leaders

Throughout 2025 we strengthened our commitment to developing leadership talent across the FE and skills sector, delivering a wide-ranging portfolio of programmes that reached 371 delegates from first-time leaders to senior executives. Our offer spanned emerging, middle and executive leadership and focused on strategy, culture, change and improvement, technical leadership and personal leadership effectiveness.

371 delegates trained across inhouse and open programmes.

A number of colleges were supported with bespoke inhouse programmes, designed to respond to the unique and specific organisational priorities and our open programmes attracted delegates from all corners of the FE and skills sector.

In 2025, we grew our offer by introducing three new programmes, the **FEA Executive Leadership Team Development** programme, the **Leading Authentically** programme for senior level leaders and the inhouse **Building Better Business Cases** programme. All three programmes delivered excellent outcomes for our clients and are now a permanent feature of our offer.

Participant feedback was exceptionally strong, with an average satisfaction score of 4.9 out of 5. Delegates described their experiences as transformational, citing the balance between reflective practice and practical application. High demand for follow-up sessions confirmed the lasting impact of our leadership development work, which continues to equip FE leaders with the insight, confidence and skills to meet the sector's evolving challenges.

On a 0-5 scale, we achieved an average satisfaction score of 4.9

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Client testimonials

"The courses I have attended with FEA have been transformational! The Leading Authentically Programme has taken me on a journey to understand how change and communication can affect actions and behaviours in the working environment. It has given me the tools to become a better leader."

"FEA designed an outstanding leadership and management programme for East Surrey College. They tailored the content to our specific needs, blending individual and team activities perfectly. Their support helped us create new college values and a leadership charter."

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Appointing leaders

Senior level search for leaders and governors

Our leadership recruitment team is recognised for leading the way in senior level search and recruitment for leaders and governors. Given the expertise and professional backgrounds of our search consultants we are able to bring our deep sector knowledge to understand the unique challenges of each client we support.

Our team work incredibly hard to build enduring partnerships with our clients and this has resulted in a high-level of repeat engagement and support for multiple roles.

Our search and recruitment activity in 2025 covered all levels of senior leadership as well as a number of governance appointments. We supported our clients with the recruitment of CEOs, Principals, Deputy and Vice Principals as well as senior professional services leaders such as CFOs, HR Directors and Directors of Governance.

73% of the colleges we supported in 2025 were returning clients.

In 2025 the total number of search assignments increased by 19% compared to the previous year and the number of applicants rose by 21%, indicating broader reach and engagement with potential candidates. Of those candidates who received an offer, 91% accepted their position.

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Diversity and inclusion are of real importance to us in our search and recruitment activities. We are a proud affiliate of the Black Leadership Group and are the only provider of senior level search and recruitment services to publish our data on ethnic diversity.

In 2025, 25% of applicants were from non-white backgrounds, a 2% increase on the previous year. This highlights the fact that the sector has further work to do on strengthening the representation of Black and Minority Ethnic leaders on senior teams and governing bodies. We are committed to supporting the sector in this work and always work with our clients to enable them to identify their priorities for diversifying leadership.

We have maintained a balanced approach to gender representation, with 42% of appointed candidates identifying as male and 48% as female. Our appointments span ages 30 to 64, reflecting our commitment to a multigenerational workforce that values experience and potential at every career stage.

The CFO challenge

During 2025 we observed a marked rise in Chief Financial Officer vacancies. This trend appears to have been driven by retirements, career moves and a limited pool of experienced senior finance professionals within the sector seeking new opportunities. The resulting shortage presents a significant challenge for colleges aiming to secure strong financial leadership.

In response, we developed a tailored induction and support programme for new CFOs, particularly those joining the sector from outside FE. The programme provides an intensive two-day immersion led by experienced FE professionals, offering a deep understanding of funding, finance and sector-specific challenges.

Client testimonials

"The support from FEA while seeking my next leadership opportunity within the FE sector was exceptional. During the initial early exploratory stages, Jo provided helpful guidance on the skills and experience I needed to progress within the sector. I am grateful for the personal approach and clear feedback that enabled me to be successful in my application to be a Deputy Principal at Newham College."

"FEA, and in particular Amanda, were amazing throughout the recruitment process. A fresh and modern approach to recruitment in the sector. This is the first company I have worked with who provide exactly what they promise: a person-centered approach to candidates, regular and highly effective communication, honest advice, guidance and support, whilst ensuring professional integrity is their top priority."

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Supporting excellence

Quality improvement service

In 2025, a comprehensive range of quality improvement services were offered to our clients, designed to enhance both curriculum and academic excellence as well as quality assurance and development. Our quality improvement specialists collaborated closely with over 31 colleges to support improvements in teaching and learning, curriculum design and preparation for inspection. Our consultant team have extensive experience as senior leaders, inspectors and improvement consultants.

31 colleges supported with quality improvement services by 45 expert consultants

Specific quality projects in 2025 included joint curriculum reviews, inspection readiness for a large multi-campus college group, reviews of safeguarding effectiveness, joint lesson observation programmes and assessments of quality assurance processes. We also provided consultants to assist with reviewing the effectiveness of self-assessment and quality improvement planning.

As a further strand of activity, we also provided coaching and mentoring for leaders and managers of quality and delivered targeted training in teaching and learning. Our tailored approach contributes significantly to continuous improvement across the organisations we work with.

Strategic Quality Partnership

Our Strategic Quality Partnership has been developed to provide structured, coordinated and aligned support for quality improvement activities, enabling quality initiatives to be strategically planned, designed for maximum impact and delivered by our assured consultants. This partnership model reduces bureaucracy and workload while embedding our activities into client organisations' ways of working to drive sustained improvement and measurable impact

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Client testimonials

"We worked with FEA to support our staff to understand how our curriculum might be reviewed by external agencies. We are a large college working inside an even larger group structure, so we had a number of complexities that FEA worked through with us over several months to arrive at a meaningful curriculum review structure. During the actual week of the review, we had a great experience working with the consultants from FEA, who provided a great coaching experience for all our curriculum leads."

"The support provided by FEA throughout our three-phase inspection-readiness project was excellent.
The initial 'crafting your curriculum intent training' session was comprehensive and tailored to our specific needs, ensuring that our team of curriculum managers developed their confidence in articulating the purpose and focus of the provision their lead.
Curriculum managers found the live feedback they received from the consultants most beneficial, so through FEA's responsive project management and expert guidance we re-designed phase three to take a stronger coaching approach."

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Contributing to the sector we love

Whilst our primary purpose is to support our clients through the range of services we provide, we are also committed to making a wider sector contribution and to supporting leaders, organisations, sector staff and students. In 2025, we were delighted to sponsor a number of awards, to support sector leadership thinking and support college staff with their charitable endeavours.

Good for ME Good for FE

We were proud to once again support the national Good for ME Good for FE Awards by providing individual and team prizes for outstanding acts of service and social action. As a long-standing partner and sponsor, we help sustain a platform that promotes kindness, collaboration and civic pride - qualities we see daily in the FE leaders and practitioners we work with.

Now generating over £6 million in measurable social value through thousands of volunteering hours and local initiatives, the campaign demonstrates what the FE community can achieve through shared purpose and collaboration.

FEA - Proud to champion social action across Further Education

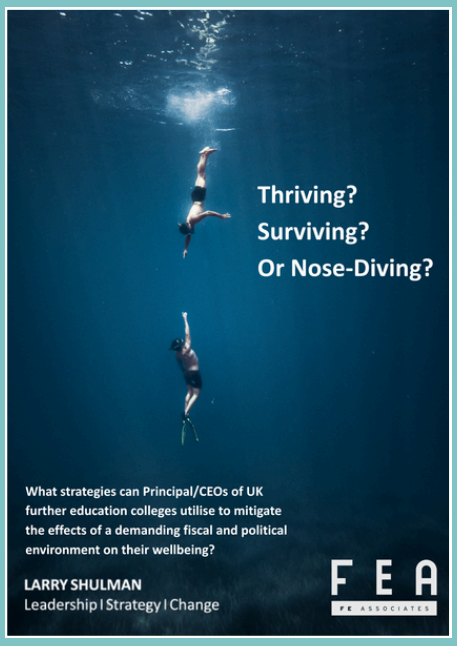
West London College Student Awards

We were once again proud to sponsor West London College's annual Student Awards, celebrating the exceptional achievements and determination of learners across the college community. Our ongoing support for this event reflects our belief in recognising excellence and encouraging ambition at every level of further education. By partnering with colleges like West London, we help to showcase the transformative impact of learning, highlight success stories and inspire others to pursue their goals.

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Thriving, Surviving or Nose Diving

This year, we have been exploring how leaders across the FE sector are coping with the pressures and demands of an ever-changing landscape. That's why we were proud to launch Thriving, Surviving or Nose Diving, our new publication produced by Larry Shulman. Drawing on his extensive research into the wellbeing of FE Principals and CEOs, this important work captures the reality of leadership in our sector with honesty and depth.



This publication is timely, addressing the growing importance of understanding the human side of leadership. Our aim is to encourage open conversations, provide targeted support, and reinforce our commitment to the wellbeing and resilience of leaders at the heart of the FE community.

West Midlands Colleges Future Leaders programme

The Future Leaders Programme made a significant contribution to developing emerging leaders across West Midlands Colleges. Designed to nurture talent, promote diversity and redefine leadership, the programme combined masterclasses with in-person and virtual sessions to build self-reflection, confidence and practical skills.

Matt Atkinson, FEA Managing Director, voluntarily led a session titled "Developing the Leader Within" at City of Wolverhampton College on 10 April 2025, guiding participants through leadership readiness, career development and self-reflection exercises. Drawing on his experience as a Principal/CEO, he facilitated interactive discussions that encouraged participants to embrace their leadership potential.

Feedback was highly positive, with attendees reporting increased confidence, motivation and preparedness to pursue new professional opportunities within the sector.

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Extending our reach: Investing in causes that matter

We supported charitable causes through a variety of initiatives in 2024/25. Donations were made on behalf of three College CEOs to their chosen charities during marathon events. We also sponsored EKC Group's Team Emily in the 2025 London Marathon, raising funds for the Teenage Cancer Trust and supported an FEA consultant's son in his fundraising efforts for the mental health charity MQ. Additionally, we contributed to the EKC Group and Christ the King Sixth Forms Christmas Appeal, helping to advance their community projects.

Colleges West Midlands

Future Leaders Programme

GOOD FOR ME
GOOD FOR FE



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Innovating for the Future

2025 was a year of innovation and development for FE Associates. We believe it is incumbent upon us to refine our services and offer, respond to emerging trends and needs, add more value and continuously improve on what we do for our clients. During the year we were delighted to form a new partnership with the Chartered Institution for Further Education, to launch a new FE specific Artificial Intelligence company and expand our search and recruitment offer in to the Higher Education sector.

Partnership with the Chartered Institute for Further Education

During the year we were incredibly proud to form a new partnership with the Chartered Institution for Further Education, the only Chartered body for technical and professional further education. This collaboration recognises our shared commitment to raising the profile and professionalism of leadership across the FE and skills sector.

Through this sector-leading partnership, graduates of our leadership development programmes now have the opportunity to gain professional recognition as Associates of the Chartered Institution for Further Education. This marks an important step in aligning leadership development with formal professional status, helping to elevate the standing of leaders and managers across the sector.

This partnership adds a new dimension of value for participants, recognising their commitment to personal growth and sector improvement. It reflects our passion for developing the next generation of leaders and our belief that great leadership underpins great learning.

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FEA-I

Recognising the growing importance of digital transformation in education, we partnered with AI specialists Leading AI, to launch a new company focused on utilising cutting edge AI technology to reduce the workload of sector leaders whilst enabling data driven insights and better decision-making.

Our new AI platform, KnowledgeFlow for FE, utilises retrieval augmented generation AI and has been created specifically for the FE sector. By partnering with Leading AI we have been able to combine the deep sector expertise of FE Associates with the specialist AI capabilities of Leading AI to provide tools that automate various management activities whilst providing clear, actionable insight that supports confident, evidence-based decision-making.

By the end of 2025 we were working with 25 colleges to implement FEA-I's KnowledgeFlow platform as a means of accelerating and supporting our clients AI strategies. FEA-I represents the next step in our mission to support excellence in Further Education through intelligence, innovation and collaboration.

University Leadership Associates (ULA)
Bridging FE and HE Leadership - New Frontiers

During the year we launched University Leadership Associates (ULA) to extend our commitment to exceptional leadership into the higher education sector. Drawing on nearly two decades of experience supporting Further Education and recognising that universities face many of the same challenges, ULA was created to provide a search and recruitment service offering that combines that combines HE expertise, strategic insight and people-centered practice.

Through ULA we are bringing our personalised, inclusive and unique approach to leadership search and recruitment. Our new service offering to the HE sector will support universities and HEIs in securing leaders who can navigate complexity, inspire teams and deliver positive change. Our reach extends across academic, professional and executive leadership roles, including Vice-Chancellors, Pro Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Directors.

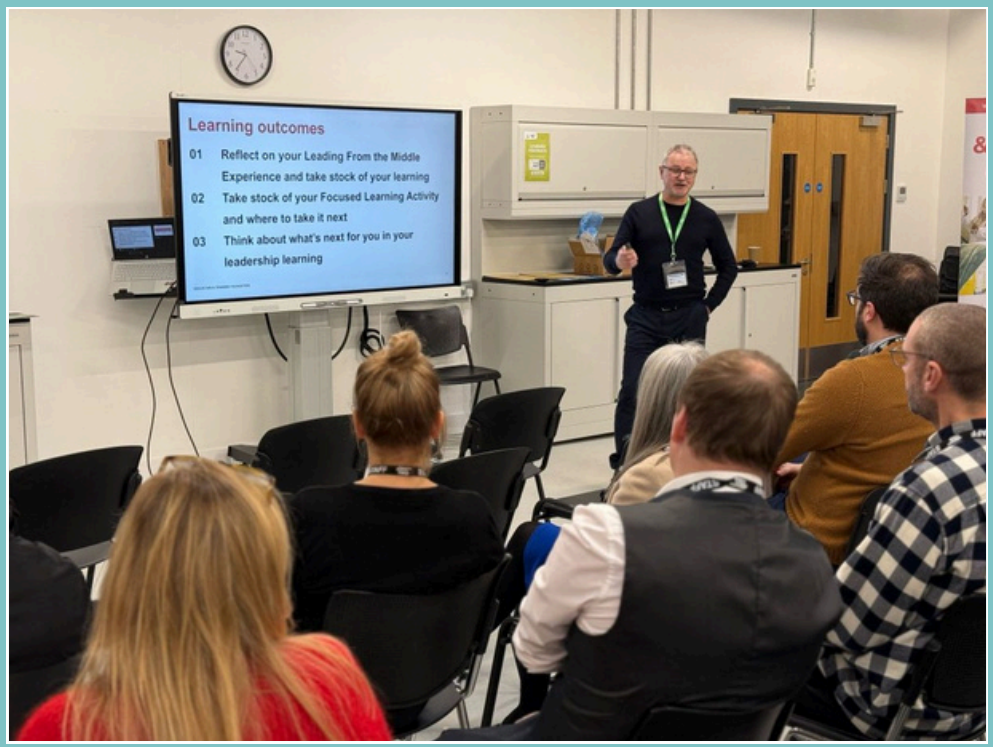
In essence, ULA reflects FE Associates' belief that great leadership transforms education - and through this, transforms lives.

Looking forward

Throughout the year, we demonstrated the breadth and depth of our mission: sustaining colleges through transition, cultivating leadership talent, strengthening institutional effectiveness and enriching sector culture.

Our strategic innovations - from the partnership with the CIFE to our new innovative AI services and HE outreach - signal a growing horizon for what we can offer.

Looking ahead, we remain dedicated to bridging capability gaps, investing in leaders at all levels and amplifying our influence for the collective good of FE and beyond. With each placement, programme and partnership, we advance the belief that when people are placed first, institutions and communities thrive.



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