

Because the world  
needs schools to thrive

# THE NEW ART OF HEADSHIP 2023

A study of the changing  
nature of headship in UK  
independent schools

Executive Summary, 2023



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**In 2013, we published “The Art of Headship”, our first research report looking at the ingredients of successful headship of UK independent schools. Ten years later, the schools’ environment is very different. Our new study explores how the role of Heads has changed and what new skills and support they need for success today.**



To do this, we consulted over 150 Heads and other experts between January and June 2023 to explore these topics. Our overall conclusion is that there have indeed been important changes of emphasis in terms of the challenges facing Heads today and the skills they need for success. Whilst there are a few differences between different types of school, Heads have generally voiced consistent opinions and a number of clear themes have emerged from different locations and types of school and from Heads with different levels of experience.

If we were to summarise the whole study in a couple of sentences, they would be these:

**In the last ten years, Heads have faced an increasingly complex and challenging environment in which expectations of many stakeholders across the school community have changed. As a consequence, headship in UK independent schools is generally more pressurised and demanding and requires greater emotional strength and resilience.**

## What are the new challenges and changed responsibilities of headship?

Whilst there are positive developments over the last 10 years included in our report, most of the key changes to headship which are described in our research stem from additional or greater challenges which Heads now face. We have identified nine major challenges which the modern Head faces more than before.

**01** Responding to **unprecedented financial and strategic pressures**. Financial pressures are nothing new and there has always been a need for Heads to think strategically. However, many see the cumulative effect of Brexit, Covid, decreasing affordability and the financial pressures arising from a possible change of government as representing an altogether different level of threat to their school, perhaps even threatening its existence. This was perhaps the most tangible change to the schools' environment and is seen by the Heads we consulted as the single most challenging aspect of their changing role.

**02** **Parents' expectations have changed**. A key finding of our research is that parents are generally more demanding, expect more personalised attention and are more likely to raise contentious issues. We found that...

... there has been a significant increase in the amount of time spent by Heads (and other senior figures) dealing with formal complaints and sometimes litigation, from a minority of parents.



**03** Heads cannot simply manage their staff the way they themselves were managed earlier in their careers. As in other sectors, **staff attitudes and expectations have changed**. Staff are often less available or willing to take on additional duties and expect more focus on their own wellbeing. Heads report spending much more time on contentious staff issues than in the past. Heads told us they need to take a more robust, more procedural approach to managing people in order to comply with significant, additional, legal considerations. Some see a need for greater openness and transparency in how decisions are made, with staff often more aware of their entitlements and willing to make demands.

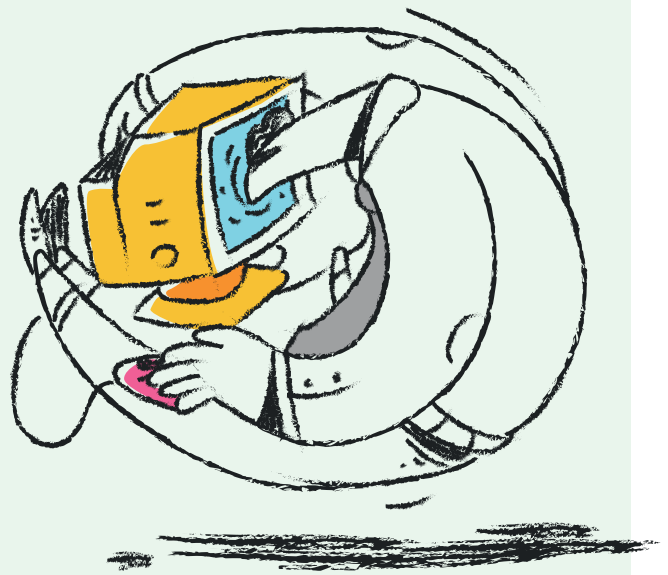


**04** Supporting **student mental health** was chosen by the Heads we surveyed as the challenge where they have seen most change. This reflects the very significant increase in the incidence and awareness of student mental health concerns, with schools often becoming the front line of support due to overwhelmed public services. Many long-serving Heads saw this as completely different to when they started their headship. As well as putting in place several additional, proactive pastoral and educational measures, Heads also describe having to deal with situations for which they do not feel they have the necessary skills and knowledge.

**05** Schools have increasingly found themselves at the forefront of societal changes relating to **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**. Heads are expected to navigate and provide leadership in such areas and more responsibility is placed on schools to handle related, complex areas such as gender identity.

**06** Running alongside all these changes is **omnipresent social media**, adding scrutiny, reputational difficulties and the potential for greater escalation of issues. Leading in the age of social media means schools are facing additional PR challenges and often have less control over the timing and content of communications and, of course...

...the Head is so often in the “digital spotlight”.



**07** Heads are now facing additional complexity and need additional resources to comply with changes to **regulations and inspection**. Statutory regulations are now broader in scope and more prescriptive across more areas of school management. Heads identified more potential pitfalls regarding regulation and inspection and a greater risk of getting things wrong.

**08** Heads now spend more time on **external affairs** such as alumni relations, fundraising, the development of local educational partnerships, the recruitment of international students and working with international schools.

**In general, Heads' roles are more externally focused than ever before.**

**09** A growing number of Heads are exploring opportunities to change dramatically aspects of education through **Artificial Intelligence**. Some are optimistic about the possibilities for efficiencies and improvements in teaching and learning although, of course, it is still very early days.



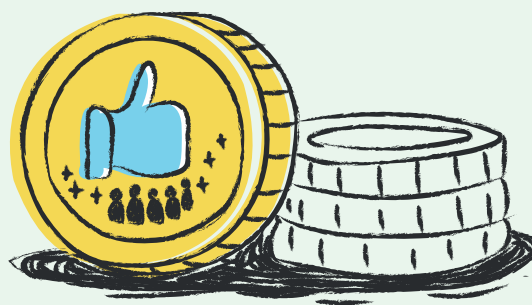
## What skills do Heads need to face the new challenges successfully?

As a result of the new challenges and the changed responsibilities of headship, some skills and knowledge areas have become increasingly important:

→ In response to financial pressures, many Heads report needing to demonstrate greater **acumen for business, strategy and finance** as well as an up-to-date understanding of economic, legal, political and societal changes.

**Heads need to apply this knowledge and develop strategic responses which are even bolder and more creative and which might fundamentally challenge their business model.**

→ As the Head's role becomes more strategic and externally focused, there is an increasing need to **develop senior colleagues and delegate** to them. Many Heads have expanded their senior teams over recent years to engineer a complementary mix of skills. To support this, some Heads stressed the importance of adopting a less directive and more coaching style of leadership. Heads also identified the need to **manage stakeholder expectations, especially those of parents**, since the Head cannot personally be as available or as involved in the details of school life as they were before.



→ The increased requirement for Heads to adopt an **external focus** requires them to develop an additional understanding of areas such as fundraising, a real determination and vision to establish new partnerships and even greater ambassadorial skills.

→ Much of what we discuss in our report involves Heads facing a **greater breadth of responsibilities and complexity** in their roles. This requires the development of better time management, adaptability and the ability to work sometimes with less control, leading more change and tolerating ambiguity. Increasingly, Heads cannot be experts in everything that goes on in their school. They therefore need to be more effective at obtaining specialist support and advice where required.

**Success in headship nowadays is even more dependent on getting the best out of others and this includes working more collaboratively with the Board.**



## What are the implications for the recruitment, support and development of Heads?

The implication of these changes which was raised more than any other is the need for Heads to **build resilience and manage their own wellbeing**. Many successful and experienced Heads expressed the view that someone can possess the knowledge and skills but unless they can work in a sustainable way, they will not succeed as a Head in this increasingly pressurised environment.

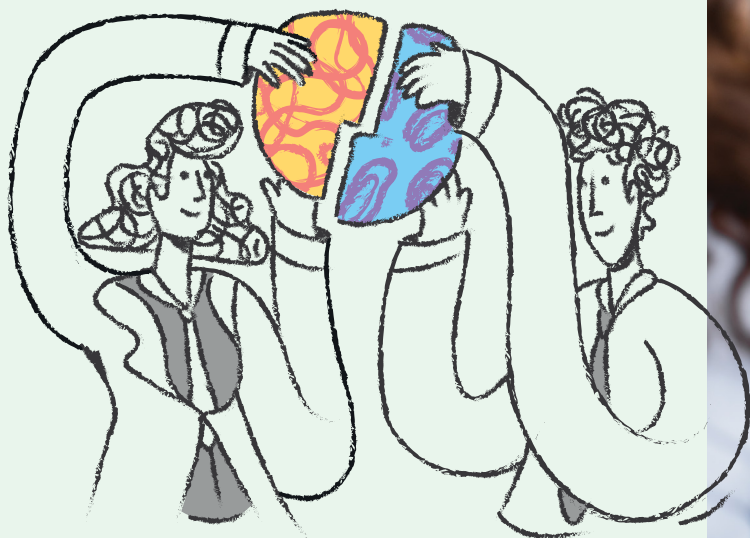
The increasing pressure and emotional burden of headship points to the need for a **Continuing Professional Development (CPD) model for Heads and aspiring Heads focused on what we describe as “leading self” and “leading others”**. It would have a greater emphasis on the more personal, interpersonal and emotional aspects of leadership, rather than the traditional focus on content and knowledge.

This suggested shift in CPD is reflected in the much **greater use of coaches** and mentors by Heads. Our suggestion is also in keeping with the view that the role of governing bodies needs to evolve. There should be a little less emphasis on holding Heads to account and a little **more emphasis on providing reassurance and support**.



Governing bodies will also need to adapt the way they recruit new Heads. In particular, **governors will need to change their approach to candidate assessment** to ensure it is nuanced and sophisticated enough. Governors will need to uncover the interpersonal skills and emotional resilience successful Heads require, along with the wide range of other skills which are becoming increasingly important.

As the challenges of headship increase and change, so the recruitment, support and development of Heads needs to adapt to ensure Heads and the schools they lead can thrive in this more demanding environment. ■





We are a holistic,  
multi-service consultancy,  
completely dedicated to  
helping schools thrive.

# HOW CAN RSAC ACADEMICS HELP?





For us, this means helping our clients:

- Benefit from the most outstanding leadership possible
- Become or remain strong and sustainable businesses, whatever the context in which they operate
- Be happy and safe learning communities.

All our services today are designed to these ends, although it was not always that way. When we started in 2002 our work was primarily to help schools with marketing, market research and strategic planning. Before setting up the company, our Founder, Russell Speirs, had worked at Unilever in similar roles and been the Marketing Director at Uppingham School.

Then, in 2009, we began to support Boards with the appointment of Heads. By 2015 we were handling almost half the agency-led headship appointments at UK independent schools, but we felt something was missing. We could see that school communities were not always able to benefit fully from having great leaders because the Heads needed extra support and the governors needed to be more effective. So we developed our review, coaching and training services for governors and Heads, which are now taken up by schools all over the world.

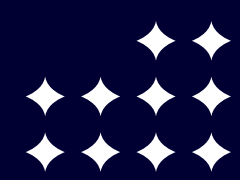
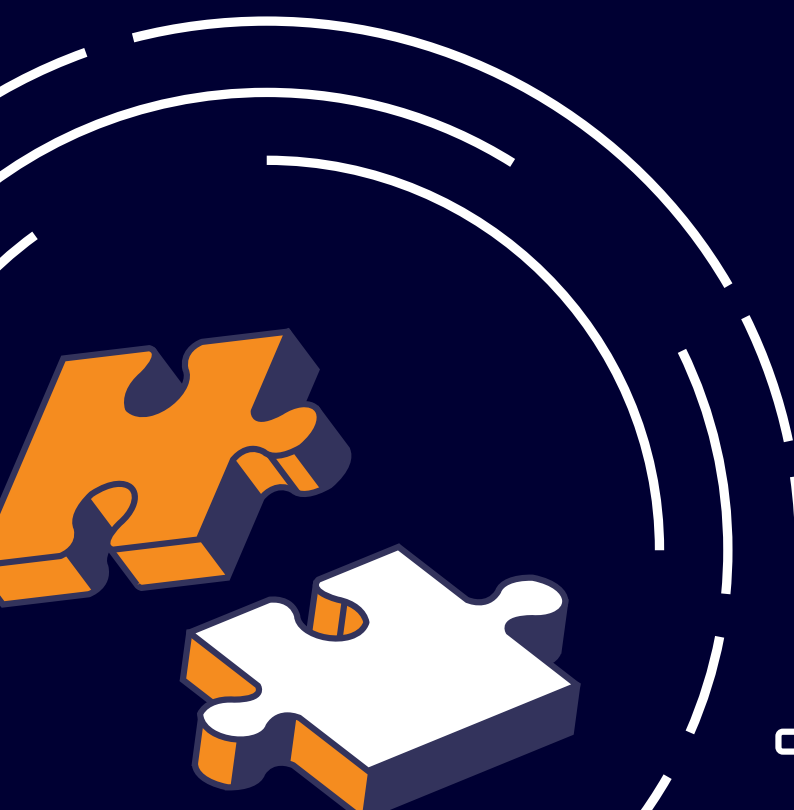


Around the same time, we set up our fundraising consultancy business to support “not-for-profit” schools with their development. We also added to our strategic consultancy team the sort of financial and business analytics that more and more clients were calling for, as they looked to strengthen their business model in challenging times.

More recently still, we have developed some pioneering research tools to measure student wellbeing and inclusion, and have developed strong consultancy partnerships with other specialist providers, including All-in Education.

We believe that now, in our 22nd year of operation and with a team of over 80 consultants and administrators, we are more able than ever before to offer the range of services schools need to thrive. Or put another way, we believe we now have the range and depth of expertise and insight to help with the increasingly complex art of headship.

Please do get in touch, in complete confidence, if you would like to know more. In the first instance, write to [info@rsacademics.com](mailto:info@rsacademics.com) so we can make sure you reach the best qualified person.



## APPOINTING HEADS

By the end of 2023, we expect to have managed the appointment of just over 500 Heads and Deputies of UK independent schools. We have a unique approach and structure which benefits our clients and reassures candidates, and we have been awarded exclusive use of the Kampus 24 microsite technology to promote vacancies and target the best people.

We are already beginning to apply the insights from this research study and to combine them with personality testing to help Boards of Governors identify and assess the most outstanding leaders, capable of rising to the new challenges of the job.

## SUPPORTING THE WELLBEING AND DEVELOPMENT OF HEADS

This study shows just how demanding and difficult the role of a Head has become. We continue to offer supportive and developmental appraisals of Heads and now we also partner with Charlie Warshawski and his team of coaches at Love Your Coaching. Everyone we interviewed for this study had experienced or could appreciate the benefits of coaching. It is normal and it works. Please get in touch to learn more.

## ENSURING EFFECTIVE AND COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Governance is changing. There is a need for better informed, more diverse, better organised and, as this study shows, more collaborative governance. More than ever, Heads need to work closely and communicate openly with their Board. We can help. Read our 2023 report entitled "Upwards and Onwards" about how school leaders can work better with their Board. Or contact us for a governance review or training, which is always tailored to the culture and stage of development of your school Board.



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## ADDRESSING THE STRATEGIC CHALLENGES, STRENGTHENING THE BUSINESS MODEL AND PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

For over 20 years, RSAcademics has been supporting schools to prepare for the future, organising collaborative and energising workshops, conducting research or advising on school improvement and student enrolment. Schools ask us to conduct one or a combination of the following:

- Market studies, competitor analysis, brand positioning studies, demographic mapping
- Perception and attitude research among stakeholders using various methodologies, including our flagship tailored online surveys
- Advising on strategy, developing plans or assessing specific business initiatives and opportunities, working with Boards and Senior Teams as facilitator and guide, to stretch possibilities and encourage courage
- To improve student recruitment and retention, we conduct transformational Marketing & Admissions Audits and put together effective marketing plans
- To help schools improve their educational provision and overall school administration, we conduct wide-ranging reviews of a school's operation, from financial management to governance and leadership structures, almost always with a major focus on the educational provision itself.

If a major change programme is planned, after or without our advice, we also help an increasing number of schools with its implementation. For example:

- Our communication specialists work to identify key messages and plan the finer details of a communication and PR programme. They have a deep understanding of the nuances of communicating change in an educational setting.
- We also provide project management support, either by temporary membership of strategy groups, the secondment of an associate to the school or the recruitment of a dedicated project manager.

## STRENGTHENING SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAMS

One consequence of the increasing demands and complexities of their role is that UK independent school Heads have looked to strengthen their leadership team. By “strengthen”, we mean grow and/or up-skill and/or delegate to more. We help with the recruitment of senior leaders and Deputies as well as carry out studies - objectively, sensitively and rigorously – to help with the re-engineering of the top team. We help Heads make sure they have the “right people on the bus” and in the right roles, too. And through our partnership with Love Your Coaching we train Heads in coaching skills.

## SUPPORTING STUDENT WELLBEING

We are delighted to have recently announced a partnership with Teen Tips, who provide those looking after children and young people with access to up-to-date professional advice and practical tools so they are equipped to deal with the pressures of growing up. Training and resources are delivered via webinars and talks and through the The Wellbeing Hub, a live and interactive web app that provides expert support for the whole school community to access.

In addition, we have recently launched a new pupil voice survey service, which makes it easier than ever to gain feedback from your pupils via a user-friendly, flexible and confidential survey service. At just £3\* per pupil per year, “Pupil Voice” provides scheduled, regular pupil feedback. The content is aligned with the new ISI Inspection framework and will help you develop a considered and co-ordinated programme of surveys that will provide you with the feedback you need to support student wellbeing.

## DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING HAPPY PARENT RELATIONS

Managing changing parent expectations and responding to an increasing number of parents raising formal complaints is the most time-consuming of the changes to a Head’s role. We believe that regularly taking the pulse of parental satisfaction with an established feedback programme is central to supporting more effective parent engagement.

Each year, through our surveys, more than 20,000 parents in the UK share their views about their children’s schools. This provides the most robust benchmarking dataset in the sector. We present personally the results of every tailored survey and we add value through recommendations and sharing our sector-wide insight.

## FUNDRAISING AND DEVELOPMENT

Fundraising is a relatively new and important responsibility for Heads and, as this study has shown, one for which not all of them are prepared. We can provide personalised and discreet coaching and advice, recruit fundraising professionals or advise on specific elements of the fundraising strategy. All schools can achieve success and since 2015 we have helped over 100 schools generate fundraising income and build a long-term culture of philanthropic giving.

## EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Under this heading come a wide range of new opportunities, and also challenges, for the leaders of independent schools. These are considered in our report. It is an area which many Heads find difficult.

To help us become a leading provider of EDI solutions, RSAcademics has developed a strong, formal partnership with All-in Education, a key provider of EDI services to schools. Together, we support schools in their efforts to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

The specialist Research Team at RSAcademics has worked for a few years already with All-in Education to provide “Sense of Belonging” surveys for school communities. In addition, All-in Education offers:

- A flagship leadership development programme, which combines training and facilitated discussions to support senior leaders in developing EDI strategies
- Comprehensive training for classroom practitioners to help them create inclusive learning environments
- Audits to support curriculum development, governance, and inclusive staff recruitment.

\* This price is valid for 2023 only and may change thereafter.





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