



# THE ART OF THE BURSAR

An in-depth exploration of how the Bursar's role is changing in UK independent schools and the implications for the sector.

Researched and written by RSAcademics  
in partnership with ISBA

**ISBA** | INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOLS' BURSARS  
ASSOCIATION

# FOREWORD

**At RSAcademics, we know that education matters: it is why we are relentless in our efforts to help schools excel - educationally, strategically and operationally. The business and operational leadership within schools, typically overseen by Bursars, plays a pivotal role in that success.**

We are delighted to have commissioned this report in collaboration with the Independent Schools' Bursars Association (ISBA). It represents the most comprehensive examination to date of the Bursar's evolving role in UK independent schools. It reflects what we see in our daily work with school leaders and governing bodies: that the Bursar is not just a financial steward, but a key strategic leader whose influence is integral to a school's direction and viability.

This report sits alongside *The New Art of Headship* and contributes to the growing body of RSAcademics' research into the evolving realities of school leadership. While each focuses on a different role, both reports reflect a shared context: one of increasing strategic challenge, operational pressure and emotional demand.

The research highlights the increasing complexity of the Bursar's remit. From finance and estates to HR, compliance, IT, and even public relations, the modern Bursar navigates a breadth of responsibilities that demand both technical acumen and strategic vision. These challenges are heightened by financial uncertainty, regulatory change, and the growing expectation that Bursars lead as well as manage.



Our findings highlight that this work is not only essential but sadly can also be under-supported. Many Bursars, particularly in smaller schools, are managing immense responsibilities with limited internal infrastructure and external support. Supporting Bursars is a strategic imperative. Their role underpins the effectiveness of Heads and the confidence of governing bodies. Schools that invest in this leadership are more likely to weather change and emerge stronger.

For many years, RSAcademics has supported schools with the recruitment of Bursars and other senior professional leaders. We also work with governing bodies helping to provide strategic clarity and to ensure schools are not only well-led, but built on strong, enduring foundations. The insights in this report, gathered through interviews, surveys and sector consultation, are already shaping our thinking and will inform how we continue to evolve our services in response to the real-world pressures schools face.

We are grateful to all those who contributed to this study. Their candour and insight give depth and urgency to the findings. My thanks also go to the team at RSAcademics for the depth of their research, the rigour of the analysis and the clarity with which they have presented the findings in this report.

We hope this report provides a basis for meaningful conversations within leadership teams and across the sector. Most importantly, we hope it serves as a catalyst for better understanding, greater collaboration, and sustained investment in those people who, from behind the scenes, help to make independent schools viable and vibrant places to learn.

Bursars deserve to be seen, heard and supported. At RSAcademics, we are committed to ensuring that they are. ■

**HEATHER STYCHE-PATEL**  
CEO, RSACADEMICS

## A note from David Woodgate, CEO of ISBA



**ISBA** | INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOLS' BURSARS  
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The role of the Bursar is evolving. As schools navigate an increasingly complex educational and business landscape, the expectations placed on Bursars have never been greater. From financial stewardship and operational management to strategic leadership and stakeholder engagement, today's Bursars must master a broad and demanding skill set.

This is why ISBA has worked with RSAcademics to publish *The Art of the Bursar* – a timely and important report which highlights that the expectations placed on Bursars have never been greater and their impact never more critical.

The report gives voice to Bursars across the country, acknowledging the breadth of their responsibilities and the strategic importance of their work. It examines the expansion of the role in recent years, the skills and experience essential for success as well as looking at how Bursars can best collaborate with heads, governors, and other stakeholders in their schools.

As the largest constituent association within the Independent Schools Council (ISC) with nearly 1300 member schools, ISBA is proud to support this research. Our comprehensive advice and guidance services and our bespoke professional development training enable the Bursars and business managers in our member schools to tackle financial, operational and regulatory challenges with knowledge and confidence. Joining ISBA means Bursars in schools, both big and small, quickly become a valued part of a welcoming and supportive professional community.

The findings of *The Art of the Bursar* report will help inform ISBA's future strategy, ensuring the association continues to adapt and grow to meet the changing needs of its members as it has been doing since 1932.

My thanks go to all the Bursars, COOs, CFOs, finance managers and business directors/managers who shared their experiences openly and constructively to enable the publication of this report. We are pleased to detail the findings with you in the pages that follow, in the knowledge that they will continue to inform the evolution of the profession and the art of the Bursar into the future. ■

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This publication is the latest in the RSAcademics series “The Art of ...”. The report presents the most detailed exploration to date of the evolving role of the Bursar in UK independent schools.

Commissioned by RSAcademics in partnership with the Independent Schools' Bursar Association (ISBA), the research draws on over 300 survey responses, alongside in-depth interviews and focus groups with Bursars, Heads, governors, and sector experts.

The findings confirm that the Bursar's role is undergoing rapid change, becoming broader, more complex, and more strategically influential than ever before.

However, amidst the complexity and pressure, what shines through is the deep sense of purpose, enjoyment and professional pride that many Bursars bring to the role. A role they describe as demanding, but also rewarding, impactful and personally fulfilling. Our aim is to provide evidence-based insights and practical guidance for those appointing, supporting, or working as Bursars.



## A role of expanding scope and strategic influence

Bursars are now pivotal to a school's strategic leadership. No longer confined to finance, they increasingly oversee HR, estates, compliance, IT, operations, and in many cases are also Clerk to the Governors. Almost all Bursars surveyed said their role includes direct involvement in strategic planning.

The knowledge required has expanded significantly, with legal and regulatory understanding increasing most sharply. Strategic thinking emerged as the skill in greatest demand, and resilience and emotional strength was rated both the most important personal quality and the one growing most in significance.

Bursars are increasingly expected to navigate high levels of complexity, influence diverse stakeholder groups, and act with emotional intelligence - all while maintaining operational excellence and long-term strategic focus.



## Adapting to school culture and leading across communities

One of the most distinctive findings is that 90% of Bursars had no experience of working in schools prior to their appointment. This makes the school sector unusual: it is rare for a leadership role in any sector to be filled so frequently by those new to its professional culture. Transitioning into a values-based, relationship-driven environment requires more than operational knowledge.

Adjusting to school life is not always straightforward. Bursars described a sharp learning curve, not just around terminology or routines, but in leadership style. Schools operate through consensus, relationships and traditions. Many new Bursars reported having to unlearn leadership structures or fast-paced decision-making norms from previous careers in finance, the military, or business. Bursars must adapt their leadership style to one that emphasises presence, visibility and shared purpose.

The Bursar is unique among school leaders in the diversity and size of the teams they oversee. While Heads typically lead teaching and learning staff, Bursars are responsible for a broad range of functions from finance and HR to catering, cleaning, IT and estates. They must manage people across different pay scales, skillsets, and employment conditions, and do so in a way that fosters shared values and respect.

Those who thrive tend to immerse themselves in school life: attending events, learning from academic colleagues, and building trusted relationships. Successful Bursars act as cultural integrators, bridging academic and support staff, and modelling mutual respect across different teams. These behaviours are not incidental to effectiveness; they are central to it.

## A varied role shaped by school context

Although the title “Bursar” is widely used, the role differs significantly depending on school size, type, and structure. 22% of respondents work in schools with fewer than 250 pupils, and 8% in schools with fewer than 150. In these settings, Bursars are more likely to carry wide-ranging responsibilities with limited internal infrastructure. While the challenges are shared across the sector, Bursars in smaller schools face particularly acute pressures around workload and isolation.

Despite the variation in context, the research revealed strong commonality across the profession. Regardless of school type, Bursars reported similar challenges and skill demands, underscoring the importance of supporting the role consistently across the sector.

## Rising pressures and operational complexity

The Bursar's role has become increasingly demanding, marked by both growing scale and heightened complexity. A common concern among Bursars is the struggle to find time for strategic thinking amid the relentless pace of operational responsibilities. Financial pressures remain a dominant theme, with many highlighting the impact of VAT on fees, rising payroll costs, and broader concerns around affordability. At the same time, compliance and regulatory demands continue to escalate, often described as one of the fastest growing and most burdensome areas of the role.

The scope of HR leadership has also expanded significantly, now forming part of the role for 80% of Bursars. This shift brings with it complex employee relations, legal risks, and increased focus on staff wellbeing. Added to this are rising parental expectations, with Bursars frequently managing sensitive issues related to fees, complaints, and communications - often within a more transactional and emotionally charged environment. Together, these challenges create a professional landscape defined by urgency, high volume, and limited margin for error, particularly in smaller schools where resources and capacity are already stretched.



## A common concern among Bursars is the struggle to find time for strategic thinking amid the relentless pace of operational responsibilities.

### Strategic leadership in action

Despite these pressures, Bursars are stepping confidently into strategic leadership. Many are driving innovation, diversification, and change - whether through commercial initiatives, digital transformation, or governance reform. The move from operational delivery to strategic thinking is both a response to necessity and a sign of the profession's evolution.

However, carving out the time and space to lead strategically remains a key challenge. The research highlights that strategy often competes with a constant stream of urgent issues, particularly where internal capacity is limited, or leadership expectations are unclear.

Schools that deliberately create the conditions for Bursars to lead - through team structure, governance clarity, and cultural alignment - are best placed to benefit from their strategic capability.

## A nuanced understanding of effectiveness

Our research identifies **five core dimensions** that collectively define effectiveness in the Bursar's role. Each represents an essential lens through which to understand the role, not just in terms of task, but of leadership capacity and professional judgement.

**01 Knowledge:** Technical knowledge remains fundamental. Financial fluency, legal understanding, compliance, HR, and IT competence all underpin credibility and effectiveness. Yet with the growing pace of change and specialisation, what is important is not mastering every detail, but knowing what matters - and where to seek expert advice.

**02 Skills:** Bursars require a distinctive skillset to operate successfully at the crossroads of education, operations, governance, and people leadership. The ability to influence, manage conflict, solve complex problems, and think strategically is key, particularly in high-stakes or emotionally charged situations.

**03 Personal qualities:** Traits such as resilience, humility, tenacity, and clarity of thought emerged as vital. The role can be isolating, pressured, and politically sensitive, often demanding emotional intelligence as much as technical expertise.

**04 Working environment:** Even the most capable Bursar is limited by the conditions in which they work. A supportive governance structure, clarity in leadership relationships, strong operational teams, and aligned strategy are critical contextual enablers. The relationship with the Head and Chair of Governors was consistently cited as a key enabler.

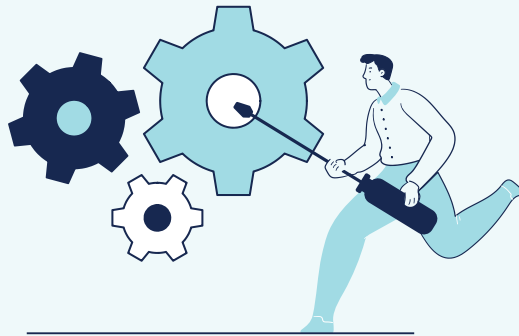
**05 Ways of working:** This final dimension represents the Art in the Art of the Bursar. While knowledge, skills, and personal qualities provide the foundation, it is a Bursar's ability to navigate complexity, lead with nuance, and apply judgement in dynamic environments that distinguishes the most effective professionals. These ways of working are not easily taught. They are refined through experience, reflection, and adaptability. These behaviours are what allow Bursars to stitch together disparate parts of the school, balancing operational delivery with cultural fluency and strategic foresight.



## Co-produced success

A key theme emerging from the research is that effectiveness cannot be achieved in isolation. The most impactful Bursars work within environments where leadership is co-produced: Heads, Chairs of Governors, and professional colleagues share responsibility for creating the conditions for success.

Where Bursars are supported, trusted, and given the mandate to lead - within well-aligned governance and leadership structures - the impact on school performance is tangible. Conversely, even the most capable Bursar will struggle in an unsupportive or unclear environment. Success is not only about the individual, but about the ecosystem around them.



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## Evolving the role: Rethinking responsibilities and structures

There is a growing recognition that the current structure of the Bursar role may not be sustainable, particularly in smaller schools. The breadth of responsibilities, rising legal risk, and need for strategic leadership suggest it is time to rethink how the role is defined and supported.

This may include separating operational and strategic functions, redistributing Clerk duties, investing in middle management, or creating more structured professional development pathways. Futureproofing the role will require new thinking about responsibilities, support structures, and succession planning.

## Implications for appointment, induction and support

The findings of this report highlight a clear imperative: schools must recognise the Bursar not only as an operational leader but as a strategic figure whose success depends on an insightful appointment process, structured induction, ongoing development, and tailored support.

**Appointment processes** should prioritise leadership potential as well as technical competence. While financial literacy remains essential, the ability to influence, adapt, and work effectively within school culture is critical, especially as 90% of Bursars enter the role from outside of schools. Cultural fluency, emotional intelligence, and communication skills are key selection criteria, alongside resilience and the ability to lead across diverse teams.

**Induction** is particularly important for those new to schools. Structured onboarding should go beyond process and compliance to include exposure to the academic life of the school, relationship-building with key stakeholders, and support in understanding governance and school culture.

**Professional development** must be prioritised as expectations grow. Strategic thinking, legal compliance, and people management were all identified as increasingly important areas of expertise, yet many Bursars report limited time and support to develop these areas. Investment in coaching, peer learning, and structured CPD is essential, particularly for those transitioning from other sectors and those in smaller schools.

These actions, taken together, can ensure Bursars are not only operationally effective but strategically enabled, and consequently able to meet the challenges of their role and contribute fully to the long-term success of their schools. When these factors align, Bursars describe their work as not only manageable, but deeply rewarding. Where they are absent, the risks to schools and to the individual are significant.



## In conclusion: A role of depth, challenge, and profound impact

The role of the Bursar has never been more pivotal or more demanding. The Bursar is a critical figure in the leadership of independent schools. Their influence spans operations and strategy, risk and culture, compliance and community. They must balance urgent daily demands with long-term strategic thinking, work across a broad spectrum of disciplines, and lead through uncertainty - often with limited internal support. Our research confirms the importance of supporting Bursars not only in what they do, but in how they lead.

When well-supported, Bursars describe their work as energising and deeply fulfilling. When under-resourced or misunderstood, the risks to individual wellbeing and school performance are significant.

If schools are to thrive in an increasingly complex landscape, they must value, invest in, and enable their Bursars to succeed. The Art of the Bursar offers a roadmap, grounded in evidence, for doing just that. ■