

inTuition RESEARCH



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RESEARCH IN FURTHER EDUCATION: WHY WE MUST MAKE A FUSS ABOUT IT

If FE wants a powerful voice in deciding its purpose and place in society and education, a policy to build research capacity in the sector is needed, say **Dr Gary Husband** and **Sam Jones**.

Dr Gary Husband:

I left further education (after years of teaching and management positions) specifically to try and secure funding for research work within FE. Paradoxically, I had to leave FE to increase my chances of securing funding to conduct research in that very sector. With a few notable exceptions, funded FE research is not carried out by people who work in FE.

Sam Jones:

As a researcher in FE I am pleased that practitioners are starting to raise their voices; the *Dancing Princesses* books are a notable example, as are movements like Tutor Voices and Research meets, both of which are sector-led movements. Increasing numbers of FE staff are convening for, or involved in, the Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN), and sharing their research at conferences like the Association of Research in Post Compulsory Education (ARPCE) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA). There are changes within colleges – my own college has a research network and a blog, and it provides me with paid PhD study leave.

REFERENCES

• McDonnell, M. and Grubb, W.
<https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2009/R4026.pdf>



Dr Gary Husband is a lecturer in education at the University of Stirling and **Sam Jones** is an advanced practitioner at Bedford College.



Read Sam's blog at
<https://bcgresearchnetwork.wordpress.com/>

One possible future is that further education research is thought of in the same way as research conducted in universities. FE-based research would inform those areas relevant to it – for instance: commerce, industry, leisure, health care, engineering and so on.

This sort of work is rare in FE, but it does exist. There are examples of colleges leading the world in areas such as solar-generated power and electrification of fleet vehicles. FE, by its very definition, is filled with experts from many industries, many of whom are able to provide the bridge between industry and researchers. There are also distinct opportunities to enhance the learning of students through their own engagement with research work.

We hold the view that those working in FE know and understand its purpose and the role it fulfils within education. If research is being used to shape the sector, decide its future and inform the decisions made about it, then the expertise of those working in it should be given primacy.

If FE wants a powerful voice in deciding its fate, remit, purpose and place within society and education, then informing that debate through the creation of new knowledge and understanding developed at the heart of the sector potentially offers more than observations conducted from outside.

The problem of access to training and the understanding of the important theoretical underpinnings of good research can be mitigated either through strong research partnerships with universities, or through development and retention of individuals within the sector.

When considering policy on vocational education McDonnell and Grubb (1991) conclude that while inducements such as money are popular policy levers, it is capacity building that tends to be the mechanism that is the most successful.

We argue that what is required is a policy of building research capacity within FE. This may require a change in culture in the sector to allow researchs to consider wider questions than simply 'what works for teaching, learning and assessment', and within universities a change to consider ways of engaging with colleges to co-create research.

REFLECTIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



By Gail Lydon, Lorna Lindsay and Colin Forrest

The contributors to this supplement reported a wide range of impacts resulting from their research. These impacts illustrated how their own practice and that of their colleagues were enriched for the benefit of students and learners.

Our curation was enhanced not only by our contributors but by those who engaged in interviews, including Colin Bentwood, director of the Strategic Development Network, and Jacklyn Williams, education author and consultant.

Organisational culture and leadership

Many contributors benefited from considerable organisational support to engage with research, and significantly, research that made a difference to their learners. Elements included: support and inspiration from peers and managers, protected space and time, and sponsorship for higher degrees. Engagement with initial teacher education (ITE) provision was often important too. The notion of scholarship also emerged.

Capacity building

Many of the research impacts reported had their origin in action research approaches. Several contributors were from SET's first cohort to achieve Advanced Teacher Status (ATS), building on the Professional Standards where pedagogical mastery is coupled with the development of high-level research skills.

Multiple research journeys were described, such as progressing from Research Development Fellow through Masters and M.Phil degrees to doctorates. SET's Practitioner Research Programme, partnering with the University of Sunderland, is significant here.

Several contributors held PhDs, but did not see their research training as complete. For example, engaging with action research emerged as a significant enhancement to highly refined portfolios of research skills.

Mediation and brokerage

The research impacts described by the contributors often had their origins in collaborative practice. The influence of a rich and growing ecosystem of research networks and communities emerged as important in supporting individual and collective research journeys.

These groups invariably centred in exploring the interplay between research evidence and teacher practice. A wide range of approaches was important here, but all involve some degree of brokerage and boundary spanning (Forrest and Morris 2018).

A wide range of ETF programmes, including the Outstanding Teaching Learning and Assessment (OTLA) programmes, contributed to fostering the development of research.

Looking forward

In undertaking the curation, it was clear that FE research is alive and well and we hope that the contributions bring this to the surface. Challenges emerged for us too. There is no neat route or pathway that provides an exemplar of a research journey for others to follow. In addressing multiple priorities, the learning and skills sector is so diverse that it is unsurprising that the research journeys of FE practitioners are more complex than reflected in the toolkits for the schools' sector.

The importance of shared and collaborative spaces for fostering research in further education emerged strongly. Such entities owe much to Joint Practice Development and its advocates and resonate with the emerging findings from the BERA close-to-practice research project. Here 'close to practice' is defined as research that "focuses on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and involves collaboration between people whose main expertise is research, practice, or both". We were fortunate that the curation resulted in rich contributions from all three groups.

