The importance of practice-focused research across the FE and Skills Sector

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## The sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All further education and skills providers</th>
<th>Total number of open and funded providers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colleges</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General further education colleges</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth form colleges</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist further education colleges</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent specialist colleges</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent learning providers (including employer providers)</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community learning and skills providers</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-19 academies</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance and drama colleges</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education institutions</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Careers Service contractors</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ofsted, Annual Report 2017
A changing landscape

Number of learners before merger:
- 0 to 4,999: 46
- 5,000 to 9,999: 36
- 10,000+: 12

Number of colleges:
- Before merger: 94
- After merger: 43

Source Ofsted, 2018: 77
FE and skills sector provides education, training and apprenticeships for around 3.3 million learners aged 16 and above (Ofsted, 2017)

FE colleges see higher levels of disadvantage among students compared to maintained schools and sixth forms (AoC, 2017)

Spending per student in an FE or sixth form college is now 11% lower than for pupils in a secondary school (Children’s Commission, 2018)
Where 16 to 18-year-olds are studying or working

- 35% FE and sixth form colleges
- 23% All state funded schools
- 11% Higher education institutions
- 8% Employment
- 6% Apprenticeships
- 6% NEET
- 5% Independent schools
- 5% Other education and training
- 1% Special schools

AoC: 2019:20
Students

- 163,000 16 to 18 year olds students in colleges undertaken A Level courses

- 668,000 students in colleges are studying STEM subjects

- 204,000 students in colleges retake GCSE English and/or maths (AoC, 2019)
• Continuing study of English and maths for those without good GCSE grades at the end of Key Stage 4
• Post-16 Skills Plan and Sainsbury Report – technical education and transition offer
• Apprenticeship reforms including the introduction of the levy and new employer-led Apprenticeship Standards
• Area-based reviews aimed at restructuring the FE sector
• Devolution of the adult education budget in combined authorities.
• How would you describe the sector in one or two words?
FE and Skills Sector

- Diverse
- Misunderstood
- Complex
- Ever-changing
- Beset with reforms

- Second chance
- Inclusive

- A pivotal role
• The quality of an educational system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (Barber and Mourshed, 2007: 13)

• Across the sector, eight out of 10 institutions were judged to be good or outstanding at their most recent inspection (Ofsted, 2018)
What makes practitioner research work?
• Teachers and trainers are **reflective** and **enquiring** practitioners who think **critically** about their own educational assumptions, values and practice in the context of a changing contemporary and educational world.

• They draw on relevant research as part of evidence-based practice.
Practitioner-led research

- Developing teaching professionals for the future
- Developing an evidence base for practitioners and leaders to access and learn from
- Building capacity
- Enhancing teaching and learning across the sector
Why practitioner-led research?

- Classrooms are complex places
- Changing technologies
- Organisational change
- Ways of thinking about professional development
- Opportunities for teachers to learn and think about their own work and wanting to improve it
The unique ‘insider knowledge’ that practitioners bring to improve understanding of educational practices and processes

- Emphasises the agency of teachers and students

- In understanding the local context, wider connections can be made with policy and practice
McNiff 1988:45, Messiness of action research
• Why are my students so stressed about their GCSEs?

• What can I do?

• How do we understand this?
• Practitioner-led

• ‘Academic’

• Research and development
LONCETT has brought together lots of providers of teacher training and they have talked about teacher training: this forum was not in place before. The fact that it has been bottom up, that you have the partnership, that you have got people involved from a very broad spectrum: FE, ACL, training providers, Prison and Offender learning and got them talking about teacher education in its broadest sense is something that had not happened before.
• New challenges and therein new ways of working
• T levels, increased employer engagement, industry placements,
• Apprenticeships
• Transition offer
Dual or triple professionalism?

- Dual professionalism - with professional expertise in teaching but also as a real-world worker in the area they were teaching about (CAVTL report, 2013)

- Does this capture the breadth of the role that FE lecturers, trainers and managers plan in today’s learning and skills sector?

- Triple professionalism – emphasis on a networked approach
‘The new professional is often a networked professional, having to co-operate and communicate with a wide range of colleagues within and outside their chosen profession…this reconstructs the space for reflection – it takes place in shared and networked situations.’ (Frost, 2010:18)
‘Triple professionalism’

- Strong ethical concern beyond individual student and college performance – all young people and adults in a locality
- Understanding of the role of the college within the community and of the locality/region
- Capacity to research this environment in order to bring about positive change
- Ability to undertake multi-agency working and to collaborate with other professionals using a different language and values
- Understanding of policy and how it is mediated/translated at different levels of the system
- Highly developed communication and people skills (Spours and Hodgson, 2013)
Many learners have not always attained well in traditional examined courses

Constrained GCSE curricula offer creates problems for the next step – lack of vocational qualification may necessitate a Level 1 start

Schools and sixth form colleges raising thresholds for A Level participation

Drop out at age 17+

Previous churn of Level 2 qualifications Post-16

Implementation of T Levels
  – cannot access Level 3 T levels
  – T Levels may be too big a risk
What do ETF need to know about practitioner research?
Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL) (2013) *It's about work... Excellent adult vocational teaching and learning*. Online.