

Shared and disputed ambitions in the FE/HE interface: The development of VET practitioners

Introduction

Professional development for practitioners in Further Education (FE) represents a discrete but important example of Higher Education (HE) in FE. FE provides academic and vocational qualifications to a wide and diverse student population (Ainley, 1990, Hillier, 2006, 2012). The initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development of practitioners (CPD) in England takes place both within HE and through partnerships with FE colleges and lifelong learning provision. Recent policy initiatives are likely to disrupt the developing relationship between the HE and FE communities.

Two research studies (BIS 2012, Appleby and Hillier 2012) provide evidence for the value of CPD and ITE in different ways (national and regional). Yet the recent review of professional development led by Lord Lingfield makes recommendations to abandon the current regulatory framework for staff in FE. Implications for professional development and practice in light of the final report, (to be published in September 2012) will be raised in the presentation.

A disputed terrain

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is the 'weakest area in the education system' (Green 1999), characterised by a 'series of tragic narratives' failing to solve the central problems of VET provision in Britain (Richardson, 2007, Hyland, 2012), and is subject to a raft of policy initiatives that represent a 'permanent revolution' (Keep, 2006). The status of VET practitioners is lower than in the compulsory and higher education sectors. Yet the VET workforce is a key component of meeting current economic challenges (DfES, 2006, Keep, 2006). International studies mainly ignore this workforce, despite a larger proportion of students in Europe enrolling in prevocational and vocational programmes than general (ie academic) education (Grollmann (2008), Cedefop, 2009). Improving the attractiveness of VET is one of the priorities of European Commission so that VET can be

a well-regarded profession that attracts societal affirmation as well as attracting appropriate individuals to practice as vocational educators (Misra, 2011: 31)

Teachers in schools in England normally possess a first degree and a postgraduate teaching qualification, compared with higher education lecturers who possess a first and usually doctorate qualification in their subject and access to an in-service qualification in academic practice. Yet although VET teachers possess a vocational subject qualification, in England, only now must they possess a teaching qualification prior to entry or in-service (DIUS, 2007). These differences signify the contested space between academic and vocational systems, both in relation to the sites of learning supported, the future employment of learners engaging in programmes and the professional development and qualification of the post-compulsory workforce

Challenging trends

The Lingfield Review in its interim report suggested that the current qualification system of FE practitioners should be abandoned in favour of a simpler two tier approach. Individuals will no longer be *required* to possess a teaching qualification and colleges will take responsibility for deciding appropriate levels of qualification and professional development of their workforce. Whilst recognising that the current system may not be comparable with the compulsory and HE systems, the recommendation to end the regulatory system may dismantle the gains in professional development achieved over the past five years. If practitioners are no longer required to undertake CPD/ITE, then the good relationship between HE and FE will be put under considerable strain in the

current economic climate, where the funding mechanism is already driving the two sectors into competition rather than collaboration.

Two separate studies have established the value of CPD (and by implication the contribution of HE to the field).

Research into effective practitioner development

BIS (2012) established that there have been gains in developing teaching practices, organisational commitment to professional development and early indications of impact on learner achievement. CPD influenced professional identity where tutors who 'considered themselves electricians or bricklayers who also delivered some sessions...now see themselves as teachers' (BIS, 2012:62). Yet mandatory programmes of ITE and CPD are contested sites of practice, particularly in relation to what being a professional means. FE practitioners do resist and subvert workplace practices to ensure that their professional values are preserved (James and Biesta, 2007).

Our research involving surveys of FE practitioners' use of research practice networks (Appleby and Hillier 2012) examined how they can support practitioners in their professional roles, contrasted with official programmes of development which only focus on current standards frameworks. Expansive workplace learning environments are more conducive to deeper and more sustained learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2004) and our evidence supported this model. Research practice networks recognise the constraints within an increasingly risk averse, compliance culture but also empower practitioner researchers to take responsibility for their own professional activity, thereby meeting some of the key tenets of professionalism ie autonomy and agency (Robson, 2003). The value of CPD specifically in VET, is crucial to the continued development of professional practice that can have an impact in a far wider context, ie economic and social well being.

Conclusion

Lingfield's interim report contains a 'confirmation' by Ofsted that

No sound, causal link can be made between regulatory enforcement of teaching qualification and CPD in the sector, and improvements in practice (Lingfield, 2012:16)

Lingfield maintains a 'core belief that staff training, professional updating, competency and behaviour are essentially matters between employer and employee' (page 25). Yet the research reported here shows evidence that the requirement to have qualified staff helped sets up a positive attitude to CPD, where individuals are committed to their professional development, particularly where they can maintain their professional identity and commitment to the well being of their learners. The challenge, therefore, is to find how to sustain CPD in the changing policy context. I argue that HE has a role to play here by sustaining and nurturing the existing positive relationships that have been established through FE provision of HE level ITE and CPD. The HE sector needs to take up this challenge to help those in post-compulsory education to continue to strive for new knowledge.

988 words