

Symposium: Research and scholarly activity: negotiating the challenges of engaging in research for college-based HE lecturers

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HE/FE partnerships for research and scholarly activity

Educational research creates an environment of self-reflection and dialogue between educators within and across institutions. It also helps to expose practitioners to wider research theory and the opportunity to work in collaboration with researchers (BERA, 2013:15)

Further education teachers in England have been subject to frenetic policy activity over the past decade culminating in a review of their professionalism (Lingfield 2012) and an analysis of their vocational pedagogy (CAVTL, 2013). They work in a system which is financially constrained and increasingly subject to a performativity culture (Ball, 2003). Their teaching qualification requirement has been deregulated thereby threatening their professional status. Those who teach at higher levels in the system, HE in FE, additionally are asked to meet both quality assurance processes of HE (the QAA in England) and of FE (Ofsted). They must also meet awarding body requirements for the qualifications they teach. They are usually dual professionals, where they must adhere to their own sector specialism codes of practice within their professional bodies as well as those of the FE system. In this mix of performativity, professional body adherence and regulation, HE in FE teachers are being urged to act more like their higher education counterparts and undertake research and scholarly activity.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have also been urged to work with their local communities and foster partnerships. HEIs and further education colleges (FECs) have developed closer relationships through the provision of sub degree programmes, introduction of Foundation Degrees (FDs) in 2000 (Hillier and Rawnsley, 2008, Edmond et al 2009, Gallacher et al, 2009). Another important relationship between HEIs and FECs occurs through accredited programmes of teacher training where a significant proportion of staff in the FE sector gain qualifications that are validated by local HEIs.

The primary activity of research which has such status and importance to the HE workforce has not been replicated in the FE system. Despite attempts to support this (Robson, 2006, Hillier and Morris, 2010, Clayton, 2011), research continues to be an area of professional practice which is hard to foster. A welcome change to the professional standards recently created by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) now includes an approach to professional knowledge and understanding which acknowledges the place of research.

The argument that FE teachers should undertake scholarly activity, maintain their professional knowledge and both use and undertake research has been well rehearsed elsewhere and is the subject of this symposium (BERA, 2013, Bathmaker, Gregson and Turner, Turner 2009). The struggle over appropriating an expansive and transformative model of professionalism continues to dog the

FE system which has been so easily manoeuvred into a compliance model of professional practice (Spours and Hodgson, 2013, Bathmaker and Avis, 2005, Robson, 2006, James and Biesta, 2007). Yet there have been pockets of activity that have supported research and one of these has been gained through relationships between HEIs and FECs.

A model developed through the Learning and Skills Development Agency, (LSDA), formed a strong collaboration between the two sectors through the Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN). Amongst its activities were annual research conferences bringing together FE practitioners, HE researchers and policy makers (Hillier and Morris, 2010). Dissemination of the research undertaken by practitioners in FE and further afield in adult and community (ACL) and work-based learning (WBL) was achieved through a research journal and publication of a book. A series of regional research projects, funded by LSDA were co-ordinated by HE members of the research network in collaboration with their FE counterparts. This model of collaborative activity, where members of LSRN from FECs, ACL and WBL were given support to undertake projects in a collaborative way was subsequently replicated by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Language (NRDC), the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and now the ETF. The model of joint practice development fosters a developing knowledge of using and undertaking research. This model of collaboration has also been successful in Australia (Clayton 2011) where VET practitioners have been supported by an equivalent agency, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NVCER) although a further level of complexity through the federal nature of the country means that this level of research is dispersed throughout the states and territories.

A formal collaboration between HE and FE occurred through the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) where HE researchers worked with FE lecturers and managers to undertake research into the learning cultures in the sector (James and Biesta, 2007). Projects crossing the HE and FE divide (e.g. Gray & Wall, 2010; Mason et al., 2010), are limited (Gray et al., 2013) and cover specific areas such as teacher education which are perceived to be on the peripheries of institutional boundaries (Murray, 2007) or involve collaboration between those with longstanding commitments to partnership working (Hillier & Morris, 2010). Studies have reported the limited opportunities HE in FE lecturers have to network with research active colleagues with support for activities such as conference attendance been highly variable (Gray et al., 2013). Networking underpins the formation of research collaborations and 'safe' and sustainable spaces need to be created which bring researchers from HE and FE together in order to seed future research collaborations.

Appleby and Hillier (2012) argue that research practice networks are an important factor in establishing effective research in FE. There are, however, aspects of such collaboration that require further examination. The status of HEIs and the people who teach and research in them overshadow those from the FE system, even though many of the latter possess higher level academic qualifications themselves (see LLUK, 2010, Crawley 2014). There is a tendency for HEIs to control the process of research. The recent changes to funding for HEIs has resulted, for example, in competition for students and earlier partnerships and collaboration have been dissolved as both sectors fight to attract the necessary numbers of students to avoid financial penalties from the funding streams such as HEFCE. The fragile nature of these partnerships, therefore, can damage the need for strong relationships if fostering research and scholarly activity of HE in FE is to be sustained.

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