

<b>Institution:</b> University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 25 – Education
<b>Title of case study:</b> Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLC) project, which UWE researchers led the design of and played a key role in undertaking, informed policy debates on a range of issues including the quality of teaching and learning in Further Education (FE) settings. Several FE sector teacher training programmes (e.g. Cardiff University) have changed aspects of their content as a consequence of this research, for example to help trainees better understand and develop a positive learning culture in their classrooms. This benefits the trainee teachers and, as a consequence, the learning outcomes for the students they work with. Processes to enhance the practice of established teachers in FE have been implemented as a consequence of this research, for example, City of Bristol College’s peer mentoring scheme improves the skills of lecturing staff and outcomes for learners. The project also produced a book that has been widely adopted by FE managers and tutors to help them better understand and enhance the learning context in contemporary college and adult education environments, resulting in more effective teaching and learning. On a wider level the research findings have influenced national policy debates on issues around the funding, practice, and management of teaching and learning activities across the post-compulsory education sector, particularly in further education.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLC) project remains to this day, at (c£855k), the largest ever funded project in the Further Education (FE) sector.</p> <p>The research was a four-year (2001-2005), four-centre study of teaching and learning cultures in FE. As well as being a co-leader of the project with senior academics from each of the other three universities (Exeter, Leeds and Warwick), Professor David James, at UWE from prior to the project’s start in 2001 until 2011, was one of the two key research designers. The project also involved colleagues from the FE sector – one college worked in collaboration with each university centre – as well as the universities’ own research staff, including Dr Kim Diment, the project’s Research Associate at UWE (2001-2005), and a co-author cited in several outputs highlighted in section 3 below.</p> <p>The project was also designed in collaboration with user groups in the FE sector, helping UWE strengthen its regional partnerships and mission to collaborate with FE in the process, e.g. through the UWE Federation of nine colleges in the region, and leading to increased study opportunities for students in the south west of England.</p> <p>Sixteen FE learning ‘sites’ (four programme areas per college) provided the focuses for an intensive examination of educational practice, learning processes and learning cultures by means of a four-year longitudinal study. The principal aims of the project were to deepen understanding of the complexities of learning; identify, implement and evaluate strategies for the improvement of learning opportunities; and enhance practitioners’ capacity for enquiry into FE practice.</p> <p>This seminal research has led to a better understanding of not just the processes affecting the quality of teaching and learning, but also how to improve it, especially in light of the evidence-based challenge to established systems of audit, inspection and funding.</p> <p>Importantly, it found four possible drivers for the improvement of learning in FE:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Student interests.</b> What FE students want and need varies between and within particular courses. Their FE experience is not simply about passing qualifications and getting a good job – though these were goals for many. Students want to enjoy their learning, and to be able to balance their studies with other personal priorities such as economic survival, supporting a family, doing an existing job, or sustaining a particular lifestyle (e.g. see section 3 references 1,2,7,8).</li> <li><b>2. Tutors’ professionalism.</b> In all sites the tutor was a major influence on the quality of learning. If the huge reservoir of tutor experience, altruism and professionalism were recognised and</li> </ol>

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supported, improvements in learning would follow (references 1,2,5,6,7,8).

3. **Pedagogy.** The findings supported the view of teaching as an art rather than a technical craft. Though there are some common features of good pedagogy that can be applied almost anywhere, the application differs significantly between different sites and their learning cultures. Often the effective pedagogy observed did not fit the criteria set out for national standards and inspection, and what worked well for one tutor in one site would not have worked for a different tutor, or on a different site – it was highly context specific (references 1,2,5,6,7,8).
4. **A Cultural View of Learning.** Pedagogy, tutor professionalism and student dispositions need to be considered together with other factors underlying learning cultures as a whole. Such an approach would potentially open up the biggest improvements in learning of all (references 1,2,3,4,7,8).

### 3. References to the research

1. James, D & Biesta, G (2007) *Improving Learning Cultures in Further Education* Routledge: London and New York, ISBN 9780415427364 (paperback). (Also published in hardback).
2. James, D *et al.* (ed) (2004) *Research in Practice: Experiences, Insights and Interventions from the Project Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education*, London: Learning and Skills Research Centre ISBN 1853389609 <http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/90235>
3. James, D. & Grenfell, M. (2004) Change *in* the field - changing the field: Bourdieu and the methodological practice of educational research, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 507-523 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/014256904200026989>
4. Bloomer, J. & James, D. (2003) Educational research in educational practice, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27(3), 247-256 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0309877032000098671>
5. Gleeson, D. & James, D. (2007) The paradox of professionalism in English Further Education: a TLC project perspective, *Educational Review - Special Issue*, 59(4), 451-467 [This was in a **special issue** of *Educational Review* devoted to the TLC project's findings] <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131910701619340>
6. James, D. & Diment, K. (2003) Going Underground? Learning and Assessment in an Ambiguous Space, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 55(4) 407-422. [This was in a **special issue** of *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* devoted to the TLC project's findings] <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13636820300200242>
7. A complete list of the 68 outputs from the TLC project (including those listed above) is given on the TLRP's website. A total of 32 of these were sole- or joint-authored by one or both of UWE's project members, James and/or Diment: [http://www.tlrp-archive.org/cgi-bin/search\\_oai\\_all.pl?pn=9&no\\_menu=1&short\\_menu=1](http://www.tlrp-archive.org/cgi-bin/search_oai_all.pl?pn=9&no_menu=1&short_menu=1)
8. James, D (2011) Policy into Practice: Provider perspectives, in Hodgson, A, Spours, K and Waring, M (eds) *Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning across the United Kingdom* (London, Bedford Way Papers, University of London) ISBN 978-0-85473-904-2 <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/11690/> <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/about/48081.html>

### Key grants

'Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education' total funding of £855k, (£173k to UWE) awarded to David James – joint Principal Investigator with Exeter's Martin Bloomer (and several other co-investigators). Funder ESRC via the TLRP project. 01 April 2001- 31 May 2005.

### 4. Details of the impact

The ethos of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC's) Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), of which the UWE research was a part, was to produce *research in practice* (what it termed 'evidence-informed principles for teaching and learning or pedagogies'). The manner in which the research was disseminated and its wider pathways to impact were central to this process. One output of the research, the book by David James (UWE) and Gert Biesta (Exeter) (reference [1] above), was aimed at college practitioners and managers. It has been well

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received across the sector and is widely acknowledged that it has helped them better understand the complexities of the changing funding and policy landscape. The Head Of Adult Skills And Learning at Leicester City Council describes it as 'simply the best book we have come across for years in presenting, and giving concepts and words to, what tutors experience day-to-day in trying to do their job' (source [1] below).

The project was backed by an elaborate dissemination plan supported by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA). Project activities and outcomes were reported to practitioners, managers and policy-makers within and way beyond the four selected FE colleges, through local, regional and national workshops, seminars, conferences and publications – the strategic enhancement of impact on college processes, teachers' practice and learner outcomes being integral to the project's design. The research team worked closely with organisations including City of Bristol College and the regional Learning and Skills Research Network to facilitate the incorporation of research findings into their activities and practices.

A partnership ethos existed within the TLC project, involving close collaboration between FE- and university-based researchers, together with FE teachers, students and managers. It also integrated with existing communities of practice. This raised the capacity of the sector, beyond the traditional research community, to engage in research for themselves and improving the quality of their work, as exemplified by City of Bristol College as highlighted below. This addressed the professional needs of those involved, and the needs of the students they worked with, well beyond the period of the research itself. College practitioners were supported in researching their own practices using ideas developed within the project, and operationalised, experimented with and evaluated the themes identified by the project teams.

The project's outcomes have informed the content of various Initial Teacher Education programmes, for instance the PGCE Post-Compulsory Education and Training at Cardiff University (which was not involved in the research). Cardiff's programme has taken up key findings from the research, such as the nature of contemporary professional roles in FE and the need to understand learning cultures to ensure the best outcomes for learners. The course leader for this award has confirmed that as a consequence of adopting the project research findings and recommendations into their course, students are now far more capable of discerning and understanding distinctive learning cultures in a diverse range of departments, giving them a depth of insight missing in cohorts previously. The outcome of this is a vast improvement in the trainees' 'observational writing' and ability to understand and articulate 'ethnographic case studies on student/teacher interactions'. Like some of the many other teacher education programmes that have also adopted findings from this research, the Cardiff team identify a positive impact on the student teachers' 'professional learning and their written performance'. They also suggest trainees are much better prepared to cope with the realities of working in the sector, and that 'drop out and attrition is much reduced' as a consequence. Another benefit is that, given their knowledge of this research, the trainees are much better placed to take the opportunities afforded by 'occupational learning' whilst on placement (see source [2]).

The practice of other HE institutions unconnected to the research has also been impacted in ways beyond teacher education programmes. Thames Valley University, for instance, used the research findings in adopting a university-wide change to the planning and delivery of its programmes, and in methods of assessment they employ for their students. These changes were a direct result of an invited keynote speech and series of curriculum and staff development workshops that were run there by James and another co-director of the project (Prof Phil Hodkinson) in 2009. The day-long event was attended by several hundred university staff, including academics and programme managers, and staff concerned with a range of university services including HR. The changes introduced at the university drew directly upon the four key project findings identified in section 2 above.

Processes to ensure high-quality teaching in FE, such as the peer shadowing initiative at City of Bristol College, have been implemented as a consequence of this research, improving the skills of FE lecturing staff and outcomes for learners. A Research Steering Group was established at the college, and bursaries have also been awarded for teachers to investigate and improve their practice, and to present their findings to colleagues and spread the impact wider. Both of these schemes were set up in 2005, shortly after the conclusion of the research (in which the college was

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a participant), aligning their policy and practice with the findings in section 2 above, particularly around pedagogy and tutors' professionalism (see source [3]).

On a wider level the UWE research has influenced policy debate in post-compulsory education. Expert commentator and policy adviser Professor Frank Coffield highlighted, in his influential report in 2009, how the research's impact included tackling what he considers the flawed view of the 2006 Leitch Report into the UK economy's skill requirements. He suggested the TLC project as a whole, and in particular James and Biesta's book, impacted on practice across the sector by enhancing our understanding of how and why people learn through offering an approach consisting of two powerful, interlocking ideas '*a theory of learning cultures and a cultural theory of learning*'. Coffield also emphasised the important role of this work in influencing the national policy debate. This concept was crucial in the subsequent formulation of policy at a national and institutional level to help the creation of the 'individual learning revolution', which Coffield claimed 'the government had called for 10 years ago' (source [4]).

The veracity of Coffield's observation is evidenced by James's invited contribution to the ESRC seminar series 'New Directions in Learning and Skills in England, Scotland and Wales' to articulate the TLC project's research findings to a wider group of stakeholders across the nations of mainland Britain. The series was unusual for its deliberate combination of academic researchers, senior policy makers and institutional leaders from the three countries, and enabled them to compare policy and practice, and to take lessons from one another for the benefit of systems, organisations and individual practitioners and learners. After James's contribution to this had been written up as part of a book based on the seminar series (reference [8] above), his chapter was specifically requested as evidence for the joint NIACE/Association of Colleges/157 Group Inquiry 'Colleges in their Communities', launched in December 2010. The Inquiry was chaired by Baroness Sharp of Guildford and published its final report in November 2011 (see source [5] below).

Returning to national activities having local impact, as a consequence of the research's acknowledged importance, James gave an invited keynote address to over 1000 delegates at the Association of Colleges (the FE college principals' body) in 2007 on *How to Improve Improvement: Learning cultures and FE improvement*. It influenced practice in colleges locally on the four key findings identified by the project, with the Principals taking back recommendations and implementing them in their own organisations. The research is acknowledged to have led to a re-evaluation of college procedures on issues including staff development and quality monitoring across much of the sector, and benefits have been felt as a consequence across the duration of this census period.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

*Testimonials listed below are available from UWE, Bristol.*

1. **Testimonial** [1 on REF system] from the Head of Adult Skills and Learning, Leicester City Council.
2. **Testimonial** [2 on REF system] from the Head of FE ITE, Cardiff University
3. **Testimonial** [3 on REF system] from the Learning Improvement Manager at City of Bristol College.
4. Frank Coffield (2009) 'Just Suppose Teaching and Learning Became the First Priority' London: Learning & Skills Network. (See in particular pp.15-17)  
[http://tlp.excellencegateway.org.uk/ecpd/ecpd\\_modules/downloads/coffield\\_if\\_only.pdf](http://tlp.excellencegateway.org.uk/ecpd/ecpd_modules/downloads/coffield_if_only.pdf).
5. Baroness Sharp of Guildford (2011) *A Dynamic Nucleus – Colleges at the heart of Local Communities* [http://shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/d/y/dynamic\\_nucleus\\_-\\_full\\_-\\_final.pdf](http://shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/d/y/dynamic_nucleus_-_full_-_final.pdf) – Professor James' research evidence is acknowledged on page 38.