

Institution: Lancaster University
Unit of Assessment: 19, Business and Management Studies
Title of the case study: Developing Leadership in FE: the Practitioner Research Programme.
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>In response to the declining number of applicants for leadership posts in Further Education, David Collinson developed the Practitioner Research Programme. Funded by the UK Government's Learning and Skills Improvement Service, the programme offered FE leaders and managers the opportunity to produce research-informed answers to challenges they were facing in their own practice. Findings were developed into 88 practitioner research reports that were disseminated to every FE college in England and Wales and made available online. Research engagement enhanced knowledge and understanding of leadership issues, stimulating organisational change and improving the performance of individuals, teams and organisations. Key themes were presented at a national conference where outstanding projects received awards for the impact of research on their own FE organisation, the local community and leadership development. Findings were extensively cited in the 'Independent Commission on Colleges in their Communities' report, and in the Foster Review of UK FE.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The UK FE sector comprises a diverse range of organisations, including FE colleges, sixth form colleges, training organisations, work-based learning and adult and community learning. This research programme contributed to all these sub-sectors. The Practitioner Research Programme (PRP) started in 2006 when FE colleges were facing a leadership succession crisis. In the previous five years the number of applicants for principal posts had been steadily declining (Austin 2006). Research suggested that many qualified candidates perceived FE leadership positions to be highly stressful and not for them (Collinson 2006a and b). Managed by Professor David Collinson, as National Research Director for the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), from 2006 to 2010, the PRP was designed to develop future leadership capacity in the FE sector.</p> <p><u>Research informed answers to leadership challenges:</u></p> <p>The PRP introduced participants to contemporary leadership theory and practice and encouraged them to engage in projects that could produce research-informed answers to leadership challenges. It took as its starting point the view that practice and theory are mutually reinforcing and that empirical research is most effective when positioned within wider debates. These ideas were elaborated in a series of workshops delivered at Lancaster covering leadership theory and research, methodology and analysis, and dissemination and impact. In addition to providing guidelines on 'Good Research Practice' and 'Writing Research Reports', participants were introduced to contemporary mainstream, post-heroic and critical leadership perspectives. The primary conceptual approach was to emphasise the value of addressing the dialectical interplay between leaders, managers, followers and contexts (Collinson 2005).</p> <p>Informed by earlier empirical research in FE, the workshops also emphasised the value of 'blended leadership' practices (Collinson and Collinson 2005, 2009). This research had found that FE employees often value leadership practices that combine elements of both heroic and post-heroic approaches. They prefer leaders who are, for example, decisive but who also consult; detached enough to provide strategic direction but also close enough to be involved in day-to-day issues; and focused on 'internal' as well as 'external' communities and stakeholders. This hybrid model of 'blended leadership' informed the policy of LSIS, formerly the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL). Highlighting the significance of these findings in the Times Education Supplement (2005), the CEO of CEL explained that they are, 'now working towards a blended leadership model, which retains a principal who is definitely in charge, but is supported by a range of "engaged and contributive" middle managers.' These</p>

ideas were included in a submission to the Foster Review of UK FE in 2005 and the Leitch Review of Skills in 2006 and subsequently published in an appendix to the Foster Review.

3. References to the research

The following research has been published in international, peer-reviewed journals:

1. Collinson, D. and Collinson, M. (2009) 'Blended Leadership: Employee Perspectives on Effective Leadership in the UK Further Education Sector', *Leadership*, 5(3): 365-380.
2. Collinson, D. (2006a) 'Appeal of the Roller-Coaster Job', *FE Focus, Times Educational Supplement*, Aug 18th, available at: <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2273566>, response to M Austin (2006) '[No More Heroes Anymore?](#)' *FE Focus, TES*, June.
3. Collinson, D. (2006b) 'The Continuing Challenges of FE Leadership', *Capita*, (Autumn): 10-11, available at <http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/files/FELeadership1.pdf>
4. Collinson, D. (2006c) 'Rethinking Followership: A Post-Structuralist Analysis of Follower Identities' *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(2): 172-189.
5. Collinson, D. (2005) 'Dialectics of Leadership' *Human Relations*, 58(11): 1419-1442.
6. Kelly, S. (2007) 'Innovative Approaches to Employer Engagement' in FE, *CEL*, available at <http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/files/r6.pdf>

4. Details of the impact

Independent evaluation of the programme:

LSIS commissioned an impact evaluation of the PRP by an independent consultant (Matthews 2009). The report highlighted the value of the programme as an important vehicle for leadership development and capacity building in the FE sector - *'It is clear from the stories of participants on the practitioner research programme that engaging in the research has had a much bigger impact on them and their organisations and communities than they ever expected, outside the bounds of the research brief.'* The report findings demonstrated that:

- Researchers felt much more confident in their leadership role, and their commitment to FE and education had been rejuvenated;
- Senior managers now placed a much higher value on practitioner research;
- Some organisations now had their own research budget for staff (as a result of recognising the impact of practitioner research);
- Mutually beneficial relationships with other colleges had been developed and sustained; and, for some, involvement in practitioner research had been 'life-transforming'.

By engaging in research, practising FE leaders and managers enhanced their knowledge and understanding of leadership in theory and practice. Engagement with the research process helped to build skills, confidence and self-esteem and increase awareness and knowledge. It resulted in more critical and reflective practice, enhanced teaching delivery, and more reflexive learning cultures within the sector. The programme provided practitioners, as current or potential future leaders, with the opportunity to develop their own research question(s), explore how other organisations work, reflect on current practice, network with colleagues across the sector, and produce findings that could stimulate organisational change. It enabled them to examine how they could improve their performance as individuals, teams and organisations.

Participant led projects:

The annual research programme began with a highly competitive tendering process in which only one third of submitted proposals were funded (approximately 25 projects). Each project started with a clear research question, agreed definitions, principles, methodologies and practices. Participants were supported throughout the programme and their report findings identified key messages, from which conclusions and recommendations could be made. A particularly distinctive feature of the programme was that projects were typically conducted by those working in leadership and management positions. The seniority of these research practitioners enhanced the credibility and impact of the findings, and meant that they were well

placed to promote organisational change. The programme also facilitated formal staff development programmes in FE. LSIS practitioner research publications were used on leadership and management programmes, and colleges accredited staff participation in research projects as part of their continuous professional development.

The Principal of Northern College in Barnsley corroborates that *'taking part in the research and reading the research reports was invaluable as I moved from senior management to an FE Principal's post. Impact in terms of the sector can be judged both anecdotally, by the number of colleagues who have referred to the research in discussion, and from the excitement and buzz of the national conference where much of the work was disseminated.'*

Conference and impact awards for programme participants:

The impact of the programme was showcased at the first [National Practitioner Leadership Research Conference](#) in London in 2009, where practitioners presented their published reports and discussed what they had learnt on the programme. Over 100 researchers and delegates from across the UK attended and commented on the high quality of the presentations. The conference included an awards ceremony to celebrate and commend the impact of practitioner research on (a) the researcher's own FE organisation, (b) the local community, and (c) leadership development:

a) *Impact on organisation*- awarded to Stoke-on-Trent FE College for research on leadership and disabilities which resulted in campus-wide mandatory disability awareness training for all staff and significant changes to the design of new buildings.

b) *Impact on local community* - awarded to research at Highlands FE College, Jersey for examining the positive effects of training middle managers in 'Solutions-Focused' coaching. In addition to alerting other FE colleges of its value, the solutions-focused approach was rolled out to the whole of the States of Jersey Education Service. All primary and secondary schools are now undertaking solutions-focused appraisal training supported by the College, as is the States of Jersey Post Office. The Principal and Chief Executive of Highlands commented that the programme *'output speaks for itself, volume after volume of well researched, practical research that has made a difference in colleges. In my own college the Practitioner Research Programme has changed our culture. It has stimulated our own research and importantly this new scholarly activity underpins our Foundation degree programme and I know the same is true for many other colleges who are developing their HE profile'*.

c) *Impact on leadership development* - awarded to the Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education (GIFHE) for research on leadership and management strategies used by FE colleges in striving for excellence. It identified critical success factors common to successful colleges that could be used by organisations seeking to maintain quality during periods of rapid growth. At GIFHE this led to improved staff induction and management training/mentoring, and the embedding of a college research culture. The college also started its own research journal showcasing work by practitioners, underpinned by a series of research seminars.

Several reports also received commendations for impact. Research on employer engagement at Wigan and Leigh College explored how FE colleges can best respond to employer needs. As a result of the research, the college now has a dedicated quality manager for employer responsive provision (see also Kelly, 2007). Research at Worcester College examined the value of collaborative leadership in the context of 'study centres', leading to improved student retention and an enhanced learning environment. The Worcester report generated extensive interest, nationally and internationally. By 2010 more than 400 staff from over 50 FE colleges, HEIs and schools, from as far afield as Serbia and Poland, had visited the college to observe how the study centres operated. Research at Oxford and Cherwell Valley College outlined a set of recommendations for colleges in creating multi-faith support teams, highlighting the key importance of engaging stakeholders at all levels and in identifying faith team ambassadors to champion the initiative. At Sheffield College research on learner voice resulted in much greater

student confidence, to give feedback to the college and to speak for themselves.

The publication of FE leadership reference materials:

The FE sector was previously under researched and as such little material was available to the sector to aid development. Through this programme a 'research footprint' was created which comprises: 12 edited volumes of [practitioner research reports](#) (71 papers in total) and 17 individual practitioner reports. Hard copies of all reports were disseminated to every FE college in England and Wales, as well as to other learning and skills providers. Electronic copies (and executive summaries) were uploaded to the [LUMS](#) and [LSIS](#) websites. The edited volumes (published or re-published within the impact period) included extended editorial introductions by Professor Collinson and focused on key FE leadership themes:

- Vol. 1 - Researching Leadership in the Learning & Skills Sector: By the Sector, On the Sector, For the Sector
- Vol. 2 - Developing Middle Leaders
- Vol. 3 - Leading Quality Improvement
- Vol. 4 - Leadership and the Learner Voice
- Vol. 5 - Collaborative Leadership
- Vol. 6 - Researching Disabilities
- Vol. 7 - Leading Employer Engagement
- Vol. 8 - Distributed and Shared Leadership
- Vol. 9 - Leadership Development and Succession
- Vol. 10 - New Directions in Leadership Excellence
- Vol. 11 - Personalising Learner Voice
- Vol. 12 - Leadership and Self Regulation

The 17 individual practitioner research reports also focused on impact-related leadership themes including: Performance Management Strategies for Organisational Improvement; Self-Regulation for Local Authority and Third Sector Providers of Adult Learning and Skills; Gender and Ethnicity; and Partnership Delivery of Higher Education by FE Colleges and Universities. Being relevant and topical, the publications were valued and respected by the sector and encouraged new collaborative partnerships and the sharing of good practice between FE organisations. Practitioners at Abingdon and Witney, Grimsby, Hackney, North Devon, Oxford, Wigan, Wrexham and Worcester all reported significant quality improvements in their colleges.

Impact on policy:

In November 2011 the LSIS practitioner leadership research reports were extensively cited and discussed in the Final Report of the Independent Commission on Colleges in their Communities by Baroness Sharp ('[A Dynamic Nucleus: colleges at the heart of local communities](#)'). This inquiry investigated the role that FE colleges play within their communities, and the added public value they bring in their role as leaders of learning. Research from the LSIS programme was cited on over 30 occasions in the final report. Key findings of the Practitioner Research Programme were also submitted to Ofsted and published as a report '[The CEL/LSIS Research Programme: Responding to Ofsted](#)' (Collinson, 2008).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Matthews, J. (2009) 'Who would have thought it?: An evaluation of leader participation in research projects', commissioned by LSIS (available upon request).
2. Executive Director at Improvement Services, LSIS and Executive Director, 157 Group (previously CEO of CEL) – corroborates the relevance of the research findings and recommendations for the FE sector.
3. Principals of Barnsley College, Highlands College Jersey and Blackpool and Fylde College contributed testimonials available on the [LUMS LSIS website](#).