

## Commentary: Change And Challenges In Further Education Uk

Hengameh Karimi<sup>1</sup>, Sarwar Khawaja, Chairman<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*Further education (FE) has been described as the "neglected middle child" of the British educational system [1]. Even though it lacks the status and resources of schools and universities, further education has a unique importance in British society. Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), the largest-ever education research project in the UK, has a keen interest in FE. In this Commentary paper, we review the research projects undertaken by TLRP to explain the challenges that the further education sector and its individuals face, and the numerous policy changes that the industry has had to adapt to. We also highlight that further education is resilient and innovative. Its tutors and other staff members are a valuable resource for students who often lack confidence. They are at the forefront of both teaching and developing new skills in students, and they frequently identify and support skills that students undervalue or are unaware they possess.*

**Keywords:** *Further Education, Pedagogical Strategies, Curriculum Development, Assessment methods, Policy Implementation, Teacher-student Relationships.*

### Introduction

The research projects conducted by TLRP demonstrate that the foundation of a successful further education is the relationship between tutors and students (TLRP, 2005). Unless tutors and students have the time and space to collaborate productively, businesses, governments, and many other groups with an interest in further education will not receive the results they desire. Further education is receiving more funding than ever before, and this is reflected in its performance. However, it is imperative that this significant area of British education should keep advancing in meeting the demands of learners, employers, and the wider economy.

Like the TLRP research, our current Commentary paper in FE seeks to improve learning outcomes and impart valuable knowledge to all those involved in the sector.

### Ten principles to support more effective Further Education

FE is vast and varied. It has even greater requirements for staff development and support, and professionalism are even greater than those for schools. Nonetheless, the fundamentals of effective teaching and learning apply to all areas of education [2]. TLRP has extensively disseminated its principles for successful school education. We reiterate them here to emphasize how future developments in further education should be centred on teaching and learning (see Table 1)

Table 1 Effective Teaching and Learning (Source: TLRP)

Principles	Effects
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<sup>1</sup>Senior Research Associate Oxford Business College (OBC) 65 George Street Oxford, England.

<sup>2</sup>Oxford Business College (OBC) 65 George Street Oxford, England.

Principle 1	Equip learners for life in its broadest sense
Principle 2	Engage learners with valued forms of knowledge
Principle 3	Recognise the importance of prior experience and learning
Principle 4	Require the tutor to scaffold learning
Principle 5	Need assessment to be congruent with learning
Principle 6	Promote the active engagement of the learner
Principle 7	Foster individual and social processes and outcomes
Principle 8	Recognise the significance of informal learning
Principle 9	Depend on teacher learning
Principle 10	Demand for consistent policy frameworks with support for teaching and learning as their primary focus

Each of the above ten principals are briefly described below:

**Principle 1- Equip learners for life in its broadest sense:**

The goal of learning should be to support people in acquiring the social, intellectual, and personal skills necessary to thrive as individuals in a varied and ever-changing society and to engage as active workers and citizens. This holistic perspective of learning suggests that the learning objectives should be viewed broadly, and that social justice and fairness have to be given substantial consideration [3].

**Principle 2- Engage learners with valued forms of knowledge:**

To assist students understand what defines standards and quality in certain disciplines, teaching and learning should be connected to the big concepts, facts, processes, language, and narratives of the subjects being studied. This necessitates a deeper understanding of learning than just skill gain [4].

**Principle 3- Recognise the importance of prior experience and learning:**

In order to design the next stages for learners, teaching should take into consideration what they already know. Such a constructive view on learning entails drawing on past knowledge while also considering the unique cultural and personal experiences of different people [5].

**Principle 4- Require the tutor to scaffold learning:**

Tutors should design activities that help learners develop not only academically but also socially and emotionally so that learning is stable even when the supports are taken away [2].

**Principle 5- Need assessment to be congruent with learning:**

Assessment should be used to confirm whether learning has taken place or developed. Also, as well as providing feedback for future learning, it must measure learning outcomes in a reliable manner without being imbalanced by objectives [3].

**Principle 6- Promote the active engagement of the learner:**

In line with adult learning theorists such as [6], a primary objective of teaching and learning should be the promotion of learners' independence and autonomy. This entails growing confidence in oneself as a student, cultivating a positive attitude toward learning, and getting a repertoire of learning strategies and practices.

**Principle 7- Foster individual and social processes and outcomes:**

With the idea of Community of Practice (CoP) introduced by [7], learning is fundamentally a social process and not only a cognitive process going on inside the learner's head. Thus, it is important to support learners in collaborating with others, exchanging ideas, and expanding their expertise. It is also expected and ethical to consult learners while allowing them a voice.

**Principle 8- Recognise the significance of informal learning:**

Recalling on one of the most important lessons learnt from Covid-19 pandemic [8], informal learning needs to be respected and included into formal learning as it is at least as important as formal learning.

**Principle 9- Depend on teacher learning:**

According to [9], who describe our educational institutions as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), tutors should be treated as lifelong learners who should adapt to develop their roles and continuously expand their knowledge and skills. This can be achieved, in part, through classroom inquiry and other forms of research. Indeed, what educators and tutors need are more leeway to experiment, more flexibility to use professional judgment to determine "what works," and more space to take calculated risks to foster creativity in meeting the needs of learners.

**Principle 10- Demand consistent policy frameworks with support for teaching and learning as their primary focus- the tutor-learner relationship should be at the centre of flexible, independently evaluated policies at national, local and institutional level:**

This involves establishing a social cooperation with all stakeholders and one which is less bureaucratic. Policies should be created in a way to ensure that everyone has access to learning environments where they can flourish [10].

**TLRP's research findings on Further Education**

Further education has been essential to boosting national prosperity for a number of decades. With significant increases in recent funding, the participation rates, quality of provision, learner satisfaction, and attainment rates have all increased, and FE has become a standout area of the educational system [1].

Research on teaching and learning at all levels, from preschool provision to adult learning, is conducted by the TLRP. Every TLRP study seeks to provide results that might improve student learning in some way. By expanding the body of knowledge on teaching and learning, fostering collaboration between academics, policymakers and practitioners, and promoting evidence-informed policy and practice, TLRP hopes to positively impact the field of FE. In addition to improving the research itself, all TLRP projects in further education engage teaching faculty at every level of the project. This fosters professional development opportunities and increases research capacity within the profession.

The contributions outlined here have produced insights that are pertinent to the future and all areas of further education. We represent these through "propositions" in the following pages of the Commentary.

The three propositions are concerned with teaching, learning, and the tutor-student relationship, which has emerged as the most important link in the whole process of further

education. The first draws on innovative work on literacy, which is often characterised as a problem for many FE students. It turns out that many students have unmapped literacies that they may use in their lives in education even after they graduate from college. The next examines assessment methods that support learning as opposed to only measuring it; a concern which TLRP has also followed in its research on school and university education. Then, another proposition examines the learning cultures of FE and how they can be nurtured.

Finally we report on FE policy itself. We look both at an ambitious and overarching project on the whole field of FE policy and at a specific study of what went wrong with one ill-focused mission to use FE to enhance skills.

### **Propositions from TLRP Projects**

#### **Learning is enriched by tapping into the everyday literacies of students**

The "Literacies for Learning in FE project" set out to discover the literacy practices that students employ on a daily basis and explore the possibility of developing or utilising these practices to support their academic success in formal education [11]. Since FE participation has increased, the composition of the student body has diversified. As part of it, there are now more people who consider themselves to be academically less capable, whose prior educational experiences were disheartening, or who have had little access to the English language. It is believed that these students struggle to meet the literacy requirements of courses at all levels. But are these alleged deficiencies concealing abilities that need to be viewed as tools for enhancing learning?

When discussing literacy, both students and teachers frequently focus on the things that students are unable to achieve. Yet, these seemingly disadvantaged students use a variety of literacies in their daily lives to manage their interests and hobbies, culture, shopping, modern technology, and the intricacies of contemporary living such as taxation and the benefits system. To see whether there was any overlap or "border literacies" that might be used and modified to support students' learning, the TLRP researchers mapped students' literacy practices against the literacy requirements of their courses. Being mindful that achieving success could improve their access to college, their retention, and attainment while there.

Researchers [11] looked at four types of literacy students need in college for: being a student, taking a course, being assessed, and thinking about their imagined futures such as workplaces and what they will do when they qualify.

The students were asked to chart their personal literacy habits by the researchers. One method for achieving this was having the student sketch a clock face on a piece of paper and then annotate it with the many forms of literacy they had employed during the day, such as reading a newspaper or going shopping. Next, the students were given post-it notes with images of literacy artifacts on them and an unfilled Venn diagram showing the overlaps between job, family, and college. They were asked, where should they go on the diagram? This allowed the students to reflect on their literacy practices and consider the ways in which literacy practices from other contexts may complement one another.

The results indicate that for many students, learning new literacies for new activities is more of an issue than a lack of literacy as a technical ability. In order to cater to new audiences and goals, they must possess the ability to evaluate technology as well as vocabulary, content, and style. This is more of an issue for lower-level and vocational courses than for academic ones. Higher-level courses, like A-levels, have consistent literacy standards and employ similar types of texts; but lower-level courses use a wider range of texts and need more diverse writing. For instance, students enrolled in childcare

programmes must communicate with a wide range of audiences in college courses, for assessments, for logbooks, with coworkers and parents, and children.

The researchers found that there is a conflict between the literacy needed for vocational practice and the academic writing style required for writing up work and for assessments. It is not made obvious to students, so they are unsure which to utilise. Certain terms, such as essay, report, and analyse, might have distinct meanings depending on the context. Assessment requires a type of literacy that is not employed in the workplace or anywhere else. Tutors frequently believed that altering the way students are assessed may be the answer. However, they needed greater latitude and support from awarding bodies to make these kinds of adjustments since they did not feel capable of doing so.

In the last stage of the study, the tutors modified their methods to make the literacy requirements of the work more explicit and attempting to employ their students' daily literacy practices more precisely. As a result of this intervention, the researchers improved their theory of "border literacy." They discovered that most of the time, whole literacy practices from daily life cannot be used as resources for learning. While some elements of those practices, like their intentionality or collaborative character, might be beneficial. The tutors' adjustments had the effect of improving the students' participation, memory, and confidence.

### **The impact of assessment on pedagogy can have damaging consequences**

Research projects conducted by TLRP and the Learning and Skills Research Centre (2005) have focused on the impact of both formative and summative assessments on teachers' and students' attitudes toward teaching and learning. The findings highlight the crucial role that formative assessment plays in enhancing pedagogy—a topic that has received a lot of attention from academics in the education industry. Based on studies conducted in schools [10], teachers who prioritise formative assessment as part of their pedagogy see significant gains in their ability to teach, student achievement, and engagement with the learning process. Nevertheless, further research is required to identify the elements in various learning cultures that support and undermine these efforts.

For most school-leavers and adults entering further education, a concentration on target-setting and achievement, governed by outcome-based assessment and qualification systems, has resulted in a curriculum deficient in content. Due to its emphasis on "assessment" and "achievement," FE seems to place less value on the terms including "curriculum," "teaching," and "learning." Alongside this focus, although there have been increases in learner satisfaction, attainment rates, quality of provision, and participation rates. But the curriculum has narrowed as a result of this accomplishment. If we want to develop methods to enhance teaching and learning in FE, we must acknowledge how this has happened and recognise the impact of broad changes on pedagogy in FE colleges.

TLRP studies on the condition of FE in colleges provide strong proof of the scope and rate of ongoing changes to funding, curriculum content, as well as assessment systems. Colleges have also had to deal with shifting political and educational agendas, structural changes, and the growing roles of a workforce that is becoming more and more dispersed. The consequences of these changes on teachers' responsibilities, objectives, and practices have been brought to light by TLRP research. It demonstrates the necessity for individuals in charge of funds, inspectors, institutional managers, and teachers themselves to have a considerably greater understanding of the context in which learners and teachers must work. It is impossible to make pedagogical changes without this knowledge. Everyone involved has to have a better understanding of what pedagogical demands are and a greater awareness of the positive effects that changes to curriculum content and assessment systems may have on teaching and learning activities as well as people's attitudes toward learning.

These research projects on assessment demonstrate how teachers and institutional management are using assessment techniques as "coaching" to improve grade achievement and maintain student motivation. This is due to concerns about targets and the need to support learners in achieving their goals, sometimes at nearly any cost. All efforts are directed towards achieving the target, including assisting students understand the meaning of the grading criteria, providing them with written and verbal comments on their work, and utilising peer and self-evaluation. Such activities, which are commonly and mistakenly referred to as "formative assessment," have replaced teaching in many classes.

### **Professionals need more room to decide “what works” in further education**

The aim of the "Transforming Learning Culture" [12] research project is to better understand the complexities of learning cultures, to recognise risks and pressures that affect learning in FE, as well as to implement and evaluate strategies to enhance opportunities for learning.

Classrooms are not isolated from the surrounding society; rather, they are microcosms of it. Each has its own complex set of relationships which we refer to as its learning culture. At its best, education expands upon these learning cultures by motivating and challenging students to go beyond their existing dispositions and undergo personal change as well as acquiring knowledge. However, such change is hardly recognised by a system where success is measured by qualifications. If education is viewed as a simple mechanical process, its revolutionary potential may be compromised. Congruent with researchers from TLRP, it can be argued that teachers and managers need room to manoeuvre and exercise their professional judgement if they are to get the best out of the situation to benefit their students.

Being mindful that learning cultures in FE emerge from the interactions of complex sets of relationships [12]. Each tutor and student has a unique set of attitudes that are shaped by their own experiences and socio-economic backgrounds. They collaborate across different groups, within various settings, in different buildings, and inside various institutions. They are further affected by various local management policies as well as national central policy. It is impossible to pinpoint a single element that is always crucial to understanding the process of learning in FE. It is the combination of these and other elements that determines each situation.

Furthermore, more central direction and management is applied to FE than to other sectors in education [1]. FE has historically had a lower status than other sectors, in part because colleges have traditionally been open to second chance students who have had limited success in school and had a vocational emphasis. Because of this, it is now more vulnerable than either schools or universities to more drastic types of managerialism, stricter auditing procedures, and more severe funding changes. The research shows that all FE institutions have seen significant restructurings, including mergers, many of which were thought to have a negative effect on learning [12]. The inspection policy in place at the time was thought to be strict. People in FE claimed that instead of relying on the tutor's judgement, it had failed to acknowledge that what may work for one set of students is not necessarily right for another, requiring consistency in teaching and learning. Also, staff members perceived auditing processes as being rigid.

Additionally, much of the drive to raise standards in FE has had little to do with teaching and learning [2]. FE is supposed to address a wide range of issues, from the moral standards of the young to the lack of the nation's industrial and commercial skills. These demanding requirements exist alongside the drive to make FE more cost-effective. The result was pressure on the system to provide ever more solutions, and at a lower cost per student. The pressure to increase participation, retention and attainment rates at the same time meant that many tutors were doing a lot of 'underground' work, supporting their students at the

expense of their own time, energy and morale. These pressures increased during the period of the research, with some tutors opting to leave the system altogether.

Yet tutors are the key feature of any learning culture. Although many factors are outside their control, they have a central significance in learning. This goes beyond methods of pedagogy. They have to interpret the meaning of their courses in social and economic terms for the students. They often work to ameliorate harmful effects on the students of college reorganisations, inflexible assessment systems and funding cuts, and they must cope with the effects of training people for low-status occupations.

The researchers conclude that the FE sector needs to be managed on a more flexible basis that allows room for professionals to act according to their own judgment of the local situations, within a set of national principles. These principles are:

- Learning is about more than gaining qualifications. These hard-to-measure gains should be acknowledged and celebrated
- To improve learning cultures, professionals should be able to choose systems and procedures that work together and support each other rather than undermining learning
- Professionals should be able to decide “what works” for their own situation and not be confined to rigid procedures
- There needs to be space for more localised judgment and creativity
- Improvement in learning requires critical reflection at all levels; government, college, tutor and student.

#### **Further Education: supporting the “neglected middle child”**

The TLRP’s research has highlighted the central role of the tutor-student relationship in FE. This partnership has emerged as the bedrock of important advances and has permitted a clearer focus on the needs of learners and employers. Tutor-student relationships are also crucial to the success of FE in helping disadvantaged, under-achieving and excluded people of all ages to develop their often fractured identities as learners, with the aid of government initiatives to widen participation.

Governments regard FE as a vital contributor to national prosperity. This means that colleges have come under pressure to concentrate on skills for employability, and to respond to employer demands. At the same time, there has been a growing focus on the personal development of young people and on work and life skills. These new priorities have often been at the expense of lifelong learning programmes. The result is a rapidly changing teaching and learning landscape with a succession of policies ranging from lifelong learning to uncapped 16-19 expansion, a renewed push on adult basic skills, and now a new focus on 14-19 growth. In England, the Learning and Skills Council has been restructured prior to eventual abolition, colleges have been reorganised and money for adult learning has been reallocated. The TLRP projects have shown how tutors shield learners from the consequences of policy change. Learners regard FE as a stable environment in which they can flourish despite educational failure elsewhere, while the workforce has experienced constant change.

The TLRP’s research shows that throughout recent changes, FE has exhibited three consistent characteristics. It is enduring, entrepreneurial - and inequitably treated in comparison to schools and higher education. As Foster put it in the 2005 report of the inquiry he chaired into the future of colleges in England, *Realising the Potential - A review of the future role of further education colleges*, “FE is the neglected middle child.”

This inquiry was the culmination of successive attempts by government and policy makers to analyse the diversity of colleges, pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses and make skills for employability their core business.

Foster also suggested that diversity in colleges was a weakness and that they should specialise. But the findings of several TLRP projects suggest otherwise. Effective teaching and learning work in different ways with different people, which calls for the flexible approach characterised by FE. Moreover, we believe the keys to good teaching and learning are the relationship between the teacher and the learner, and appropriate resources and spaces for that relationship to flourish. Colleges and other institutions in FE are not just second chance centres for 'failed' students. They also include 'rebels' who have chosen not to remain in the school environment. FE is about exploring possibilities and offering new starts, new directions, and changes of identity. A variety of teaching and learning approaches is essential. In addition, there need to be fewer constraints upon the scope of teachers for professional judgment.

Colleges' efforts to meet the needs of learners are also hampered by the multiplicity of agencies with which they have to work. The best of intentions become distorted when subject to so many intermediaries, so that colleges often have too little room to adapt to differing local circumstances and learner needs.

FE is entrepreneurial, and deals with issues and groups that schools and universities do not tackle. But we suggest that the audit culture is distorting the priorities of people working in FE. Everyone is spending more time providing paperwork to protect themselves. Local community links and second-chance education are being replaced as priorities by cost-effective recruitment, retention and achievement, almost irrespective of the quality of the learning taking place. There is also too much emphasis on assessment, at the expense of real learning. In some vocational areas, the focus on assessment overwhelms curriculum and pedagogy, and an over-emphasis on qualifications acts as an inadequate proxy for learning. This thinking centres on the completion of "units" and not on the course as a whole, nor on progression.

More recently, the problems associated with targets and the audit culture have been recognised by ministers and policy makers. Considerable changes are still needed, however, if professional staff are to be able to build on their success. Under the current system, tutors have too little intellectual space, capacity and freedom to do a wider job of educating the whole person. The research points to a limited understanding of learning by government agencies and policy makers, who often see it simply as a process of acquisition of knowledge and skills. This narrow approach does not link with our knowledge of effective pedagogy nor to the idea that learners are often engaged in a process of constructing identities for learning and work. The question is whether FE is about acquiring knowledge and skills alone or is also about learning which changes the learner by engaging them in the process. From this perspective, FE is about learning how to become a learner and how to develop an identity across education, training and perhaps also employment. It is about learners changing aspects of their lives and also the way they relate to the world.

TLRP research offers policy-makers tools to help improve FE. In common with other areas of education, FE needs to develop a learning culture, using research to examine ways in which teaching and learning in the sector can be enhanced. This will mean reframing the culture of audit and accountability to accept risk and encourage creativity among staff at all levels. While skills for employability may be the current focus, they are not the whole story. Learners embarking on FE routes need doors kept open to wider choices.

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Listing of all TLRP projects: <http://www.tlrp.org/proj/index.html>

TLRP Thematic Seminar Series on Assessment of Significant Learning Outcomes:

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