L139251025 - Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education

Further education has a unique status in British teaching and learning. It is expected to offer a second chance to a wide range of learners, and politicians regard it as essential to enhancing the skills of the UK workforce. But it is unstable, underfunded and excessively regulated.

A four-year research project that formed part of the ESRC’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme had written a new set of principles designed to improve learning in FE.

Key findings

- Further Education is expected to produce skilled people for the UK economy and to repair failings of the UK education system.
- It needs more money and better management to succeed
- FE tutors are often highly motivated and drive the learning culture of colleges. Trusting them more and managing them more sensitively is the key to better FE outcomes

Tutors set the tone

FE tutors are of vital importance for most FE students. But the researchers found that tutors vary widely in their motivation. Some are teaching courses they created and regard as vital, while others are teaching on courses of which they actively disapprove.

The Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education project found that some tutors responded to pressures they found intolerable by quitting the profession. Others attempted to improve the learning culture around them or mitigate what they saw as harmful changes. They regarded most externally-impose change as bad, including institution mergers, staff reorganisations, new inspection regimes and cash crises.

Despite these issues, the researchers say that tutors have an essential role in improving FE. Many work more than their contracted hours. They often carry out “underground” teaching well beyond their official job descriptions. Recognising their professionalism and allowing them more autonomy might yield better results.

The same applies to many students. They often do not want the things policy-makers think they should. While many students want to pass exams and get jobs, others do not. The researchers call for other aims to be recognised. This means more time for students and would require bigger budgets.

Low expectations reinforced

Many FE students come from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds. They are already in a less prestigious branch of education than students taking the university route. It is all too easy for FE to encourage their low expectations. For
example, nursery nursing students studied by the project gained in professional skill during their course but also had their identity as members of a low-pay, low-status and mainly female occupation reinforced. Successful students taking AS level psychology enjoyed their new learning. But others did less well and their confidence suffered as their status as poor learners was reinforced.

In addition, the project found that government, national agencies and college management need to work in new ways to enhance learning cultures. FE is asked to take on a major role in enhancing the UK skills base and improving national competitiveness. The resources made available for this demanding task are dwindling. An FE system with new and more positive learning cultures than today’s will inevitably cost more.

**About the study**

The team, led by Professor Phil Hodkinson at the University of Leeds, looked at the aspects of FE that help create successful learning. They found a huge number of issues that affect the culture of further education. They include the attitudes of students and tutors, the resources of FE college sites, syllabuses and qualifications, college management, funding and inspection regimes, and social and policy factors beyond the college gates.