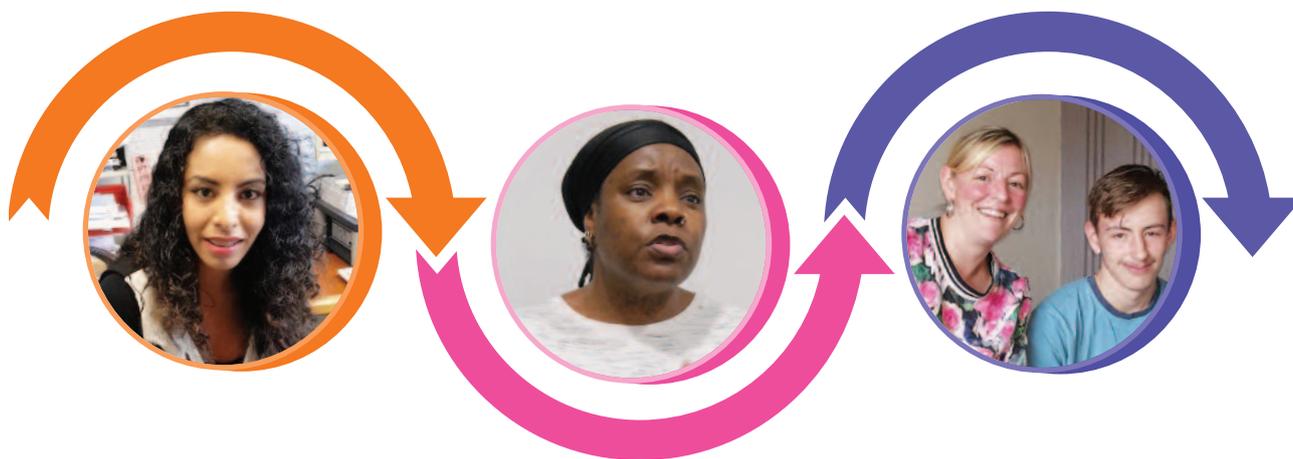


# Further education in England

## **Transforming lives and communities**



Interim report: Vicky Duckworth and Rob Smith



**BIRMINGHAM CITY**  
University



Edge Hill University

**UCU**  
University and College Union

# Foreword



The further education sector in England has been acknowledged by government as a vital sector for the future success of the UK, particularly in achieving a prosperous post-Brexit economy. The harsh reality is that central government policy interventions and cuts to public funding have resulted in the closure of courses, the loss of over a million adult learners, 15,000 experienced teachers and a similar number of support staff since 2009. There is a drive toward fewer, larger colleges in the name of efficiency that fails to understand that accessibility, flexibility and rootedness in the community forms the transformative heart of the further education sector.

The University and College Union represents teachers and lecturers working in the further education sector. We are proud that our members achieve brilliant outcomes for their learners despite the very challenging context in which they work. We want to shine a light on this fantastic work and show the tangible difference further education makes to individuals, society and the economy. Further education has long suffered from cultural disconnect, in that those making and implementing policy often do not have direct experience of the sector. Our research helps bridge that gap by illustrating the richness and diversity of the further education sector, creating an understanding of the value of further education and the supporting circumstances that allow it to flourish.

We hope that government is inspired to enable more of this work to take place, not less; and that policy and funding can be used to support the transformation of lives and communities through the power of education.

Sally Hunt  
UCU general secretary

## BACKGROUND

This research aims to understand and provide evidence of how the further education (FE) sector is vital in transforming lives and communities in 21st century Britain.

The study provided learners, teachers, parents and employers with the opportunity to tell their stories, linking the distinctness of FE to the impact it has on individuals, society and the economy, and strongly drawing out the role of the teacher in making a difference to quality teaching and learning. The research data provided a rich source of evidence for the empowering and inclusive work undertaken in FE for sector representatives and policy makers to draw upon.

This report presents some of the interim findings from the research project.

## CONTEXT

- The project makes use of a digital platform that enhances its democratic and dialogical approach to knowledge production.<sup>1</sup> A key aspect of this is the use of video recorded interviews which are edited and posted on a Youtube channel.<sup>2</sup> These are then linked to the project website.
- The project website features perspectives from learners, teachers, FE leaders, employers and learners' families, including parents and community members.
- Participants' ages span from fifteen years upwards. They are consulted throughout, before their narratives are placed in the public domain. Their views about final videos are sought and the videos re-edited in response to their viewing and recommendations.
- The focus is on learners' stories of transformation through access to and participation on FE courses, their prior educational and social experience (including their socio-economic background) and teachers' accounts of their role in scaffolding transformational opportunities and its intergenerational, community impact and wider impact.



CLAIRE

*Further education  
has put me on  
the right path.  
(Claire, learner)*



JIMMY

*Listening to the learners matters.*  
(Jimmy, teacher)

- There is also a strand that connects to funding; this is an aspect that impacts on the ability of FE providers to create the social and pedagogical conditions in which transformation can occur.

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The project aims to provide answers to the following questions:

- How does FE provide routes to higher education for learners who would not otherwise access higher education (HE)?
- How does FE offer learners the chance to engage in education at multiple stages of their life course, recognising that their relationships to employment/education are not always predictable and linear?
- Which approaches and strategies are utilised to successfully support the integration of recent arrivals to the UK through provision of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)?
- In what ways does FE provide vocational education at all levels on a holistic personalised basis that are successful in providing learners with the confidence, knowledge and skills to progress in the public and private trajectories of their life?
- What is important and particular about the learning experiences offered by specialist FE provision eg land-based, arts, SLD/ SEN provision, and provision for excluded 14-16 year olds who want to follow vocational courses in colleges in preference for school?
- How can the efficacy and appropriateness of the current funding and accountability regime be improved in order to develop a model that supports transformative further education?

### RESEARCH APPROACH

This is primarily a qualitative study to capture the rich narratives of the learners and teachers. The diversity of further education necessitates an exploration of the views of the teachers and learners underpinned by a broad analysis of sectoral policy.

Our study will consist of:

- Further education colleges across England being identified and invited to participate in exploring the key research questions.
- A descriptive analysis of teachers focusing on their views of what makes an 'excellent' teacher and how transformational learning is implemented in the classroom.
- Qualitative interviews with current and previous learners from FE courses. The aim of the interviews was to explore the experiences of present and previous learners in relation to studying and being successful in FE and their progression routes from a range of starting points into HE, training and employment, with a particular focus on identifying the enabling and challenging factors for learners.
- In total 50+ interviews have been conducted so far: 10 interviews were conducted with current learners; 10 were with former learners; 19 with teachers and managers. The interviewees came from 11 FE providers. The interviewees came from 12 discipline areas. The interviewees shared a range of experiences of the power of further education to offer transformational learning and teaching that impacted on the learners, their families and the community.
- We have collected rich in-depth case study evidence on impact including the 'ripple effect' of FE work - that extends beyond the classroom door - into families and local communities.
- We have undertaken focus groups with current teachers and learners about the impact of 'excellent' teaching.
- We are also carrying out a series of in-depth interviews and gathering reflective written responses from local and national FE professionals and funding experts as a field lens to ascertain views on the current funding policy and its implications for the provision, resources and learners' experiences. We aim



NYOMI

*My life has been transformed for the better.*

*I no longer have to take medication for depression. I have a future now.*  
(Nyomi, learner)



LUCINDA

*The biggest impact is when someone is able to read something to you that they couldn't have dreamt of doing even weeks before.*

*A college saying 'Yes' when everyone else has said 'No' - that's a big thing.  
(Lucinda, offender learning tutor)*

to provide a detailed analysis of how we came to where we are and point to a way forward that, most importantly, will support and reward transformative education and ensure it continues.

- We invited teachers and managers to provide details of how they work to provide transformational opportunities for learners and the community they serve, and to promote progression routes. We received many powerful examples.
- We have participated in events with sector-wide bodies, education providers and colleagues to consider how the findings from the study can be drawn upon and used to inform national and institutional policy.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### Current findings at interim point

- The lives of a diverse group of learners as they undertook educational programmes offer a key insight into the strong link between people's lives and their engagement in learning.
- It recognises how a number of learners bring with them significant barriers, including negative prior experiences of education. Further education addresses this aspect to achieve transformative results.
- **Labelling** In the study, labelling was a key theme. For example, Adam, Herbert and Anita all experienced labelling at school. For some students this stemmed from undiagnosed dyslexia but in others, it related to other aspects of perceived identity - such as originating from an estate with a particular reputation. One learner commented: 'people like us, from our housing estate, were looked down on'.
- **Underachievement** This labelling led to a lack of aspirations, under-achievement, self-doubt and anger. The learners we encountered in our research often felt pathologised by their experience of secondary education.
- **Reclaiming identities** FE enabled them to reclaim their spoilt educational identities, to reconstruct them, to reposition

themselves within their personal relationships and to re-enter their families and communities as active and resourceful individuals with hope and renewed status.

- **Empowerment** Learners' accounts revealed FE courses as pathways to overcoming problematic and painful domestic issues, for example, abusive relationships, alcohol dependency and mental health issues.
- Further education is also beneficial in the positive effect it can have on mental health and well-being.<sup>3</sup> For several of the participants, further education offered a lifeline that helped in their recovery from a mental health issue. Transformative education is drawn from and situated within individual and communal resources. The positive impact of the transformation extended to their family circumstances.
- The learners' narratives, transitions and trajectories are those of reflexive individuals. Their subjectivity and agency were vital contributory factors in their growth and success. This is not to downplay the importance of structural factors - rather it is to recognise that both structure and agency are important in shaping the role of further education across lifecourse transitions.<sup>4</sup>
- Low levels of educational achievement lock individuals into a cycle of poverty and dramatically lower employment prospects.<sup>5</sup> Engagement in further education ruptures this cycle.
- Further education provision, for example ESOL, provides an opportunity for the integration of marginalised and often silenced communities.
- FE offers a stream of social capital which enriches learners' personal lives, enabling the formation of supportive bonds with other learners.
- Further education brings about transformation in the selfhood and social identities of learners with few or no qualifications, reintegrating them as active survivors with renewed hope and determination in our country's rapidly changing economy.



SIMON

*Our guys are taking their experience back into the workplace.*

*Young guys are teaching new techniques to tradesmen of 25-30 years*  
(Simon, employer)



JACQUI

*I was the first one to go to university. Then there was a trickle effect throughout our family.*

*All of my cousins went after that.*  
Jacqui (student/teacher)

- Further education is a powerful vehicle to drive forward social justice.

### Teachers

- **Challenges** Realising the transformative potential of further education remains a challenge for teachers - due to funding-constrained environments and the prevalence of managerialist and performative cultures.
- **Transformative education** However, the narratives revealed how teachers actively strove to offer transformative educational experiences despite a challenging context.
- **Relationships** The teachers and their relationships with students were pivotal to transformation. At the core of their practice was a strong ethic around providing pastoral care, accepting students for who they were and believing in them. Some students had never experienced this before and consequently, bloomed.

### Employers

Our research revealed:

- recognition that workforce skills development for existing staff pays dividends
- employer investment viewed as repaid by 'ripple effect' within companies
- hands-on involvement in course design with colleges both possible and necessary to ensure responsive curriculum: to increase support for developing IT skills, for example
- college staff recognised as having current industry-standard knowledge and skills
- investing in workforce training an important aspect of company resilience.

## Experiences of learners on further education programmes

### Challenges and perceived barriers to entry

- academic concerns
- experiences of labelling
- low self-esteem
- undiagnosed educational needs
- financial concerns
- practical barriers.

### Making the decision

- catalyst points eg depression, break up of relationships
- family and friends
- planning ahead
- staying local or feeling secure
- choosing a course
- wanting a new job
- wanting to be a role model for children.

### Interviewees' views of what constitutes a great learning experience

- a trusting relationship with the teacher and peer
- tapping into their desire, commitment and passion
- providing opportunities to explore routes into HE; education and training
- experiencing diverse educational environments
- experiencing responsibility and high expectations
- overcoming doubt and taking on challenges.



KIM

*When Adam went into college, I was worried for him. But he called me to tell me how well it was going.*

*He's done really well. He has grown up. Now he's looking at things he can aim for.*

*(Kim, pictured with son, Adam)*



RIMA

*It was a long journey,  
but I've made it.*

(Rima, ESOL then  
Access student,  
now HE student)

### **FUTURE ACTION**

The research continues and the final report will be submitted in detail in June 2017.

These interim findings will be reported at the UCU Cradle to Grave Conference on Saturday 11 February 2017 at the TUC Congress Centre, 28 Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3LS.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Further education and social equality**

This project highlights how further education offers new opportunities for individuals whose lives have been adversely affected by the linearity of our compulsory education system. With 40+% of our young people not achieving the headline 5+ A\*-C benchmark including English and maths,<sup>6</sup> FE providers address the failings of a rigid, linear, assessment-heavy compulsory education curriculum that leaves many learners feeling like failures. According to the evidence from this project, further education turns this deficit, negative self-worth and low self-esteem of these learners into a positive: enhancing social integration, social mobility, the agency of these learners with consequent knock-on effects in their families and communities.

Recognition of further education's role in reinforcing social integration, social mobility and social equality extends beyond the provision of apprenticeships to the large groups of young people and adults who access further education in order to change their place in our society, to benefit themselves, their families and their communities.

These learners act as role models to others inspiring growth, change and giving hope in the communities they are from.

Further education is a vital resource for these transformative journeys.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup><http://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/about-this-project/>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkDeirtGCmeBs361BgibXnA>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/learning-for-life.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>Duckworth, V (2013) *Learning Trajectories, Violence and Empowerment amongst Adult Basic Skills Learners*. Routledge, London

<sup>5</sup>Parsons, S. & Bynner, J. (2005), *Measuring Basic Skills for Longitudinal Study: The design and development of instruments for use with cohort members in the age 34 follow-up in the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)*. London: National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy

<sup>6</sup>DfE. 2016. *Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England, 2014 to 2015*. Statistical First Report 01/2016



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