

Guest editorial: Why research in further education and skills matters

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Further education (FE) and skills occupy a distinctive and often under-theorised position within education and skills ecosystems. It sits at the intersection of education, employment, social policy and place-based economic development, serving diverse learners and communities while responding to rapidly shifting labour market demands. Despite this centrality, research has too often been conducted *on* the sector rather than *in* or *with* it, limiting its relevance, ownership and impact. This special edition illustrates the essential nature of research in FE and skills to advance pedagogy, professionalism and system-level improvement, demonstrating how it contributes to knowledge creation and improvement at scale and why it should be understood as a core mechanism for self-improving systems within FE and skills.

Introduction

FE and skills play a critical role in productivity, social mobility and regional regeneration. Colleges, independent training providers, adult community learning organisations and employer-led provision collectively support millions of learners each year, many of whom are marginalised by prior educational experiences or structural inequalities (Keep, 2018). Yet, despite its scale and significance, FE and skills have historically lacked a robust, embedded research culture comparable to that found in higher education (HE) or focused clearly on parts of the compulsory school system (Nelson and O'Donnell, 2012).

Research relating to FE and skills has often been externally driven, episodic and policy-focused, with limited engagement from practitioners themselves. As a result, it has tended to privilege system accountability over system learning and evaluation over inquiry (Coffield, 2008). In response, there has been growing recognition of the need for research *in* FE and skills: research that is practitioner-led, practice-informed and improvement-oriented. Hearteningly, the last two decades have seen such a shift towards this required increase in FE-based research practice, with various sector-led groups (e.g. Research College Group and the Association of Research in Post-Compulsory Education [ARPCE]) working collaboratively with partners from across a spectrum of education and public sector partnerships.

The contention here is that practitioner professional inquiry, practitioner research and action research are not peripheral activities but are central to the advancement of FE and skills as a professional, adaptive and self-improving system. The special edition herein seeks to demonstrate that such approaches generate contextually rich knowledge, strengthen professional identity and agency and provide a mechanism through which local learning can contribute to system-level change.

Research *on* versus research *in* FE and skills

A critical distinction underpinning this discussion is that between research conducted *on* the sector and research conducted *in* the sector. Research *on* FE and skills is typically externally commissioned, policy-driven and evaluative in nature. While such research can provide valuable macro-level insights, it frequently positions practitioners as objects of study rather than active knowledge producers (Bathmaker, 2013).

By contrast, research *in* FE and skills is rooted in practice and undertaken by, or in close partnership with, practitioners. It foregrounds questions arising from teaching, leadership and organisational life and prioritises improvement over compliance (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014).



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This distinction mirrors broader debates in educational research about democratising knowledge production and valuing professional judgement alongside academic expertise (Biesta, 2010).

The dominance of externally driven research has contributed to a perception of FE and skills as a delivery system rather than a knowledge-generating profession. Rebalancing this requires continuous and deliberate investment in practitioner inquiry as a legitimate and valued form of research.

Practitioner professional inquiry and professionalism

Practitioner professional inquiry refers to systematic, reflective investigation undertaken by professionals into their own practice, informed by evidence, theory and collaborative dialogue (Stenhouse, 1975). Within FE and skills, this includes enquiries into pedagogy, curriculum design, assessment, learner support, leadership and organisational culture.

Such inquiry is closely linked to concepts of professionalism. Sachs (2016) distinguishes between managerial professionalism, characterised by compliance and performativity and democratic professionalism, grounded in professional agency, ethics and collective responsibility. Practitioner inquiry aligns strongly with the latter, positioning FE and skills professionals as reflective, research-informed practitioners capable of shaping practice rather than merely implementing policy.

In a sector subject to frequent reform and accountability pressures, practitioner inquiry provides a counterbalance to performativity by creating space for sense-making, experimentation and ethical deliberation (Ball, 2015). It supports professionals to engage critically with policy, adapting it to local contexts rather than enacting it uncritically.

Practitioner and action research in FE and skills

Often conflated, practitioner and action research are both of particular relevance to FE and skills action research, classically defined by Lewin (1946) as a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, is explicitly oriented towards change. It enables practitioners to test interventions, gather evidence of impact and refine practice iteratively.

Within FE and skills, action research has been used to explore inclusive pedagogy, vocational identity formation, employer engagement and digital learning, among other areas (Avis, 2018). Its strength lies in its responsiveness to context and its capacity to integrate theory and practice.

Practitioner research, more broadly, is a descriptive term for those that are undertaking research within professional and practice spaces. Where practitioners undertake enquiry to generate insights into their work, they may use a full and broad range of research methods and methodologies. While sometimes critiqued for lack of generalisability, action research often offers depth, authenticity and relevance that can be absent from large-scale studies (Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, of note is the expansion of methodologies in practice-based research beyond action research and an adoption of a full range of methods, which are often pushing boundaries and making significant methodological contributions.

Importantly, these approaches contribute to what Hargreaves (1999) terms “knowledge-for-practice”, “knowledge-in-practice” and “knowledge-of-practice”, with practitioner research particularly powerful in generating the latter: knowledge produced through critical examination of practice within its social and institutional context.

Advancing thinking and practice

One of the most significant contributions of practitioner inquiry is its role in advancing thinking and practice within FE and skills. By engaging in research, practitioners move beyond tacit knowledge towards explicit, shareable understanding (Eraut, 2004). This supports pedagogical innovation and more intentional practice.

Moreover, practitioner-led research challenges deficit narratives about FE and skills by foregrounding expertise, creativity and professional judgement. It enables the sector to articulate its distinctive pedagogical approaches, including relational teaching, applied learning and holistic learner support (Lucas *et al.*, 2012).

At an organisational level, cultures of inquiry are associated with improved practice, enhanced collaboration and greater capacity for change (Stoll *et al.*, 2018). When inquiry is collective rather than individualised, it contributes to organisational learning and resilience.

From local inquiry to system-level change

A central question is how practitioner inquiry, often local and small-scale, can contribute to system-level change. Systems theory suggests that sustainable improvement emerges from the interaction of multiple agents learning and adapting within shared frameworks and values (Senge, 2006).

In this context, practitioner research functions as a form of distributed intelligence within the system. When findings are shared through professional networks, sector bodies and communities of practice, local learning can inform wider improvement (Wenger, 1998).

FE and skills have the potential to operate as a self-improving system if mechanisms exist to connect inquiry, evidence and professional learning across organisations. This requires infrastructure: time, capability-building, ethical frameworks and platforms for dissemination (Greany and Higham, 2018).

Crucially, system-level change is not solely about scaling “what works” but about building collective capacity to enquire, adapt and respond to complexity. Practitioner research supports this by normalising experimentation and reflective practice. Further to this, there is the contention that the positionality of practitioners within the sector means that only they can undertake this research and produce the results that are being acted upon. Where qualitative and interpretive methodologies underpin the analytical processes, the unique perspective of the researchers defines the lens of that analysis.

Implications for policy and sector leadership

If research in FE and skills is to fulfil its potential, it must be recognised and supported at policy and system levels. This includes valuing practitioner inquiry within professional standards, career pathways and leadership development. Sector bodies, professional organisations and funders have a critical role in legitimising practitioner research, providing ethical guidance and enabling collaboration between practitioners and academic researchers. Such partnerships can bridge methodological rigour and practical relevance (McLaughlin, 2006).

Importantly, research in FE and skills should be understood as an investment in system capacity rather than a discretionary activity. In a context of ongoing reform and constrained resources, the ability of the sector to learn from itself is a strategic necessity.

This special edition: digital transformation, workforce capability and system change in further education (FE) and technical, vocational, education and training (TVET)

This introductory editorial frames the first of two special editions dedicated to research in FE and skills sector. Collectively, the articles that follow start to demonstrate the breadth, depth and value of practitioner-led and practice-engaged research while illustrating how local inquiry can inform sector-wide learning and system improvement.

This collection brings together nine papers that examine how FE, TVET and post-compulsory education are responding to the intersecting challenges of digital transformation, workforce capability and system-level reform. Collectively, the papers foreground FE and TVET contexts that have historically been under-represented in digital education research. The opening contributions establish a strong pedagogical foundation, anchored by a systematic

review of multimodal eLearning design in TVET and post-compulsory education (Alhajri *et al.*, 2026; Lecours *et al.*, 2026). These papers explore how digital innovation is being interpreted and implemented within the distinctive pedagogical realities of vocational and adult learning environments. In doing so, they highlight the importance of designing digital learning approaches that are sensitive to the applied, practice-based and relational nature of vocational education. Together, they position digital innovation not simply as a technological shift, but as a pedagogical and relational endeavour requiring careful alignment between learning design, workforce capability and learner engagement.

Taken together, these pedagogical papers also reveal important characteristics of the current state of FE and TVET research. While there is a growing body of work concerned with digital learning design, the evidence base remains uneven, with relatively few studies offering longitudinal insight or robust evaluation of impact in vocational contexts. Several contributions in this collection respond to this gap by synthesising existing evidence and highlighting the need for research that better reflects the complexity of FE and TVET learners, curricula and employment trajectories. In this sense, the collection does not merely report on digital practice but also makes visible the methodological and conceptual challenges that continue to shape research in the sector.

Building on this pedagogical base, the collection turns to the realities of digital practice and learner experience within FE and TVET institutions. Papers clustered around implementation and engagement explore how digital approaches are operationalised and experienced, with particular attention to access, participation, and inclusion (Zielińska *et al.*, 2026; Pavlenko and Maltseva, 2026). These studies demonstrate that digital transformation in FE and TVET is highly context-dependent, shaped by organisational capacity, learner diversity and structural constraints. Collectively, they suggest that the success of digital initiatives cannot be assumed and must be understood in relation to institutional conditions and the lived experiences of learners. At the same time, they point to a broader research gap: despite policy enthusiasm for digitalisation, empirical accounts of implementation in FE and TVET remain comparatively scarce and fragmented.

The focus then shifts from learners and learning environments to the education and training workforce. Two papers examine how digitalisation reshapes professional practice, capability and career sustainability within FE and TVET (Barrett and Gosling, 2026; Deif and Cochrane, 2026). Together, these contributions highlight a growing recognition within the research literature that digital transformation is inseparable from questions of professional identity, workload and long-term workforce resilience. They also expose persistent tensions in the evidence base, including limited attention to staff development pathways and the cumulative impact of reform on FE and TVET practitioners. In doing so, the papers reinforce the need for research that treats the workforce not merely as implementers of change but as central actors in shaping digital futures.

The final cluster adopts an explicitly organisational and system-level perspective, addressing leadership, institutional adaptation and policy coherence in the context of digital and skills reform (Syed *et al.*, 2026; Hoskin, 2026; Sohdi, 2026). These papers demonstrate that digital transformation in FE and TVET cannot be understood in isolation from wider system dynamics, including funding regimes, accountability structures, and national skills strategies. Collectively, they suggest that one of the defining features of the current research landscape is a disconnect between ambitious policy narratives and the empirical realities of institutional change. By integrating pedagogical, workforce, organisational and policy perspectives, the collection underscores the need for more coherent, system-oriented research that reflects the interconnected nature of FE and TVET ecosystems.

Across these clusters – pedagogical innovation, implementation and learner experience, workforce capability and system-level reform – a coherent narrative emerges. Digital transformation in FE and TVET is not a discrete technological shift but a multi-layered process that reshapes curriculum, professional identity, organisational structures and policy environments simultaneously. By deliberately organising the collection across these

interconnected domains, this volume seeks to reflect the complexity of FE and TVET ecosystems and the need for research that bridges classroom practice, workforce development and system governance.

Taken as a whole, this collection offers both substantive insights into digital transformation in FE and TVET and a reflective commentary on the state of research in the field. It highlights a maturing but still fragmented evidence base, characterised by strong conceptual work, growing attention to practice and workforce issues and an ongoing need for longitudinal, interdisciplinary and system-level studies. In doing so, the collection positions *Education + Training* as a critical space for advancing scholarship that is not only methodologically rigorous but also attentive to the distinctive purposes, pressures and possibilities of FE and TVET.

Together, the articles in this special edition establish a foundation for understanding digital transformation in FE and TVET as a pedagogical, professional and systemic phenomenon. The second volume in this series will extend this conversation by focusing more explicitly on practitioner inquiry, research capacity-building and the infrastructures required to embed sustainable research cultures within FE and skills systems. Where this volume foregrounds digital transformation and system adaptation, Volume 2 will turn more directly to the mechanisms through which the sector builds knowledge of practice, strengthening the case for FE and skills as a self-improving, research-engaged field. Together, they invite policymakers, leaders, researchers and practitioners to recognise practitioner inquiry as a legitimate, necessary and strategic driver of sector improvement.

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