

Institution: University of Sunderland		
Unit of Assessment: 23 Education		
Title of case study: The Practitioner Research Programme: practitioner research drives sector-wide self-improvement		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2005-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Maggie Gregson	Professor of Vocational Education	2000-present
Trish Spedding	Associate Professor of Teaching and Learning	2002- present
Lawrence Nixon	Principal Lecturer	2004- present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013-December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Research led by Gregson underpins the national Practitioner Research Programme (PRP), a pioneering model of intensive research training and CPD that has created a research-active subsection of the Further Adult and Vocational Education (FAVE) workforce. Over 300 practitioners have completed the PRP, representing 94 organisations with a population of over 80,000 students. The PRP has enhanced progression opportunities for participants; improved outcomes for students; changed organisational practice and culture; raised performance in OFSTED inspections; re-energised disaffected practitioners and enhanced perceptions of research in the FAVE sector. The Education and Training Foundation has invested £2m in the PRP, which they describe as their “capstone” programme.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The innovative conceptual framework underpinning the PRP was developed at Sunderland by Gregson with co-investigators Spedding and Nixon in response to calls from successive UK governments and policy makers to bring about real and sustained improvements in Further and Vocational Education (FAVE) through impactful, systematic, evidence-informed and practice-focused research. Since 2005 their research has brought to light how widely-accepted policies and approaches to educational improvement can prove difficult to implement in practice, often with consequently disappointing results.</p> <p>Their work is particularly critical of quick fix ‘recipes’ and ‘toolkits’ to improve teaching, learning and assessment that offer de-contextualised, overblown claims to ‘best’ or ‘excellent’ practice. They contend that such technical-rational world views depend upon the construction of false divisions between practice, theory and research which make questionable assumptions about the universal nature of educational problems and advocate ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches to their solutions. They attribute these false divisions, at least in part, to persistent problems and practical issues in the implementation of educational reform [R1].</p> <p>Alongside this incisive critique of current systems of professional learning and development they introduce a promising alternative underpinned by six guiding pedagogic principles informed by Dewey’s practical epistemology [R2]. They demonstrate the need to replace ‘top-down’ policy approaches with more illuminative and democratic alternatives able to take account of issues of context. These alternatives leave room for professional judgement, while admitting subtler aspects of the processes of change that allow for more incremental and realistic measures of impact. Informed by the work of Aristotle, Dewey and Bernstein, the research goes on to propose that <i>phronesis</i> – the ability to deliberate well and arrive at good judgements in context – is a key aspect of a democratic education [R3]. Gregson and Todd focus on how institutions and contexts play important roles in mediating policy implementation and practice improvement. With reference to Engineering Apprenticeships, they develop the case for alternative approaches based on practice-focused research, not only as a means of realising policy in practice and improving teaching, learning and assessment but also as a way of supporting teachers’ continuing professional development [R4]. Their research offers new ways of thinking about the nature of a practice and how it</p>		

improves in real-life FAVE contexts [R5]. It anchors the guiding principles of the PRP to their philosophical, sociological origins, informed by pragmatic epistemology alongside in-depth understanding of the processes involved in the growth of practice and the development of skill.

In 2020, Gregson was coordinating editor of a special issue of the *Journal of Education Science* which presented accounts of research experiences and examples of practice-focused research outcomes emanating from the PRP. This included her own work [R6] and that of policy professionals, FAVE stakeholders, PRP participants and education leaders. The hundreds of examples of rigorous, systematic, impactful and evidence-based research outcomes produced by practitioners across the FAVE sector demonstrate that the PRP is significantly changing the face of policy and practice regarding research in the sector and teachers' CPD.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1 Gregson, M., Spedding, T., and Kessell-Holland, P., (2020) 'Bringing Practitioners Back In'. In Gregson, M., and Spedding, T., (eds.) *Practice-Focused Research in Further Adult and Vocational Education: Shifting Horizons of Educational Practice, Theory and Research*, pp.237-254, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan. ISBN 9783030389932

R2 Gregson, M., and Spedding, T., (2018) 'Learning Together: Evaluating and improving Further Adult and Vocational Education through practice-focused research'. In Nägele, C., & Stalder, B., E., (eds.) (2018). *Trends in vocational education and training research. Proceedings of the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), Vocational Education and Training Network VETNET*, pp.157-164.

R3 Broadhead, S., and Gregson, M., (2018) *Practical Wisdom and Democratic Education*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan and Springer Nature.

R4 Gregson, M., and Todd, B., (2019) 'Realizing Standards of Quality in Vocational Education and Training'. In McGrath, S., Mulder, M., Papier, J., and Suart, R., (eds). *Handbook of Vocational Education and Training: Developments in the Changing World of Work*. New York: Springer.

R5 Gregson, M., and Spedding, T. (2020) 'Practice! Practice! Practice!'. In Gregson, M., and Spedding, T., (eds.) *Practice-Focused Research in Further Adult and Vocational Education: Shifting Horizons of Educational Practice, Theory and Research*, pp.1-19. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan and Springer Nature

R6 Gregson, M., (2020) '[In Practice: The Importance of Practitioner Research in Vocational Education.](#)' *Journal of Education Science*, 10 (3). e79. ISSN 2227-7102.

Funding

Learning and Skills Improvement Service. £1.2m. 2008-12. PI: Gregson
Education and Training Foundation. £2m. 2013-2023. PI: Gregson

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The University of Sunderland partnered with the Education and Training Foundation to translate this research into the national Practitioner Research Programme (PRP), a distinctive, integrated-internship model of scholarship and research training that enables teachers and education leaders in the FAVE sector to conduct systematic, practice-focused research leading to high-quality outcomes and peer-reviewed publications. The PRP is the first programme of its kind in the UK and (as far as we know) the world, offering FAVE practitioners levels of investment, internship, networking and research training that were previously accessible only to researchers in higher education institutions. It pioneers a new model for CPD for the sector. Improvement of practice is driven through mutual engagement in HE-supported practitioner research in a spirit of genuine enquiry, cooperation and collaboration, where ideas and theories from educational research are tested and advanced in the arena of practice. ETF has invested £2 million in the programme [S1] and says "*The PRP is our capstone CPD programme and is essential because the more that teachers understand about their own teaching, the better they are at it*" [S2]. FAVE stakeholders have identified a "desperate need" for programmes such as this and recommend that the programme is scaled up [S3].

The ETF acknowledges the research's impact on the ethos and guiding principles of the PRP. "[The Unit's] robust research finds that conventional 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to practitioner development in the sector cannot be implemented ... This research frames the programme and methodology and creates the conditions for practitioners to undertake their own research." [S2]. An evaluation of the PRP from 2018-20 by independent consultancy SQW [S3] identifies impacts on practitioners, employers, students, and the FAVE sector.

Impact on participants

The PRP gives its participants the skills, knowledge, support and experience they need to carry out research that is rigorous, significant and original (one practitioner has co-authored a monograph submitted to this REF [R2]). Since August 2013 over 300 practitioners (both teaching and management staff) from 94 organisations in 39 English counties have completed the PRP on either an MA Short Course or MPhil pathway. Five practitioners have gone on to complete a PhD, with six more scheduled to complete within the next 18 months [S4]. The first PRP graduate to complete her PhD at the University of Sunderland was awarded a Professorship by her employing University in 2020 [S5].

SQW [S3] commends the PRP for giving "access to an MA or MPhil to people who may not have had such educational opportunities previously," and identifies five key impacts on participants, saying it:

- Improves practitioners' teaching capability and enables creativity and innovation
- Enhances practitioners' confidence and resilience and gives them a stronger professional identity; this in turn influences practitioner behaviour
- Has an "impressive" impact on career progression: 42% of practitioners said that they've had, or have potential to have, new career opportunities as a result of the PRP. Some have already secured new positions, including promotions to Head of Learning and Faculty Manager. Globally renowned education scholar Prof. Frank Coffield describes it as "a very good ladder for people into research and higher degrees, and transformation of careers as a result." [S6].
- Enhances practitioners' professional esteem. It resulted in one practitioner being appointed as an External Quality Assurer for an awarding body and as a reviewer of applications for *Advanced Teacher Status* and *Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills* for the Society for Education and Training.
- Improves motivation. Practitioners attribute to the PRP their "fresh impetus" to continue to work in the sector, saying that it "reignites passions and reaffirms your position."

In an open letter to Gavin Williamson MP in the *Times Educational Supplement*, one practitioner describes PRP as "hands-down the best CPD I have ever experienced... I was given the opportunity to undertake research that was both meaningful to me and my students. For the first time in my career, I realised that I could drive the direction of my own practice and that research didn't just have to be something that was done to me, but could legitimately and robustly, be done by me." [S7]

Impact on participants' colleagues

The PRP enables sustainable change that extends beyond the participating practitioner. PRP projects involve at least five of the participants' colleagues, thus formally engaging a further 1,500 practitioners or more with the research. In addition, SQW found that 90% of practitioners disseminated their research across their institution through conversations, meetings and institution-wide CPD, prompting colleagues to adopt practice based on their research evidence, or undertake research of their own. 46% of participating practitioners say their colleagues' practice had improved, with changes to teaching strategies, lesson design and feedback processes. Examples from SQW's evaluation include:

- PRP participants in management roles have influenced whole organisation transformation, changing practices for their staff, creating new schemes of work, curriculum redesign and/or encouraging staff to adapt their practice. One manager implemented an e-portfolio system, encouraging staff to assess more holistically and improving feedback transparency.

- Teaching staff have provided peer support to colleagues. One participant reports that a colleague was initially resistant to the practice that they were researching and implementing in ESOL. After discussions and observations with the participant, the colleague now implements some of the techniques, leading to improvements in their students' learning.
- Colleagues are more interested in research and innovation and have been prompted by participants' experience to join the PRP themselves.

Impact on organisations

The 94 FAVE organisations employing practitioners who have completed the PRP report benefits from their staff's participation. Examples include:

- Improved Ofsted outcomes. For example, one programme lead attributed its upgrade to *Outstanding* to the PRP. [S8]
- "Radical" change to CPD, with colleagues now expected to lead on the changes that they feel will most benefit their learning.
- Culture change, with greater cross-institutional focus on research-informed practice at all levels of the organisation. One college reported a growing research movement that led to it being shortlisted for two TES awards. It has won five bids on other research projects, meaning more staff are involved in research and collaborative working, in line with the practitioner's original research on effective professional development processes. They describe the programme as having 'a butterfly effect'. [S3]
- Creation of a whole-organisation, in-house PRP at one sixth form. [S8]
- Greater collaboration between organisations to share learning and implement good practice. In one case, a subject head at another organisation is piloting an approach in maths classes recommended by PRP research outcomes. [S3]
- Changes to policies, including protected time for CPD and research dissemination. [S3]

Impact on students

SQW evaluated the impact of the PRP on learners at participating FAVE organisations (collectively over 80,000 new learners per year [S9]). Examples from the evaluation include:

- In one ESOL course, the average pass rate for reading rose from 45%-77%.
- One cohort achieved a 100% pass rate at Functional Skills English Level 1, and 95% at Level 2 (national benchmark: 66% and 44% respectively).
- Unprecedented pass rates of 88% in Maths thanks to the practitioner's greater confidence in using innovative teaching methods as a result of the PRP (incorporating pop culture and music in teaching to increase engagement).
- Students are more engaged and motivated. Students of one practitioner are more engaged with feedback and another reported that students took more pride in their work, boosting their motivation to do well.
- Increased learner confidence and improved mental health and wellbeing.

Impact on the sector

ETF says the PRP has enhanced the sector's reputation, saying it "*has dispelled the myth that FAVE lacks the academic integrity of higher education and has raised the profile of practice-based research by creating a growing number of published and widely respected FAVE practitioners*" [S2]. Practitioners' research is widely disseminated to the sector through *InTuition* and *TES*. SQW note that publication of research on the FAVE sector, undertaken by FAVE practitioners, would have been "pretty unheard of" a few years ago [S3].

SQW concluded that "*the programme has enthused previously disaffected practitioners to stay in the profession, impacting the sector more widely*" [S3]. The ETF notes the PRP's lasting impact: "*this growing body of knowledge on 'what could work' creates a catalogue of plausible, probable practice interventions that will, over time, inform the knowledge that underpins the ETF's CPD.*" They commend its role in improving the sector's reputation: "*The FAVE sector is understood by policy and some public audiences that it lacks the academic integrity of higher*

education. This myth would persist if the PRP did not exist. It has demonstrated that [FAVE] practice and management can be based on robust research; moreover, this research can be done by the sector, for the sector” [S2]. The evaluation adds: “The PRP has helped to ‘change the dynamic’ between [HE and FAVE] by demonstrating to the HE sectors that research by practitioners can be both robust and effective.” [S3]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

S1 University of Sunderland financial records showing income from ETF (available on request)

S2 Written testimonial, Director of Insights, ETF

S3 SQW Evaluation

S4 PRP student records (available on request)

S5 Written testimonial, Head of Research, Leeds Arts University

S6 Interview by SQW with Prof. Frank Coffield

S7 [Open letter from PRP participant to Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education, published in Times Education Supplement 28/7/20](#)

S8 Participants’ impact grids (available on request)

S9 Database of participating FAVE organisations and their student numbers