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When Shall weThree Researchmeet Again: A Reflective Analysis to Understand #FEResearchmeet as a Lens for Developing a Research Culture in Further Education

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Abstract

This reflective piece follows a presentation at the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (Jones et al., 2025), takes up the key theses of that presentation, and sets out the authors' joint thinking as we move towards designing an empirical study to explore how #FEResearchmeet influenced and professionally developed further education (FE) workers. The paper sets out the systemic problems in the FE Sector around continuous professional development (CPD) and research and the historical failures in these areas before offering models such as #FEResearchmeet as a solution. That is, a voluntary research event by and for practitioners. The paper focuses on their impact, influence, and demonstrable ability to develop knowledge in the sector. The paper concludes with the challenges that this presents and strategic recommendations for policy makers and sector leaders. Whilst we acknowledge that much of the published work around #FEResearchmeet is anecdotal, our analysis of the collective voices exploring the initiative and its impact on participants and the wider sector (Cook et al., 2023; Crowson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2024; Jones & Scattergood, 2025; Scattergood, in Jones, 2025) creates reliability or 'trustworthiness', (Golafshani, 2003), from these numerous sources notably from co-authorship.

Keywords

further education (FE) • practitioner research • continuous professional development (CPD) • research culture • #FEResearchmeet • professional autonomy

Systemic Tensions Hindering the Embedding of CPD and Research in FE

When one notices a recurring problem, the thought that often comes to mind is '*why* is that a recurring problem?' Sometimes problems recur because, when people notice the problem, they assume it is solvable from the resources and opportunities around them at the time, which is not always the case. But then, when the problem persists, they give up and leave it to somebody else to solve. And so, the problem persists …

The recurring problem in further education (FE) is that continuous professional development (CPD), and the general notion of research practice and interests have neither successfully embedded in the culture of colleges, nor in the institutional structures of colleges or other stakeholders. Without doubt they are there but not as visible, effective spaces that practitioners inhabit (Elliott, 1996, Solvason & Elliott, 2013;). And it is not that sector actors do not support such spaces or work against it as the sector body for CPD, the Education and Training Foundation and the Association of Colleges (AoC) have both set up research initiatives. The cause of the problem may be structural, and the issue may be negligence due to the competing interests that befall a sector set up in 1992 (The Further and Higher Education Act (1992)) to compete rather than collaborate (Smith & O'Leary, 2013; Lucas & Crowther; 2016; Orr, 2020). Research and professional development have a core ethos of collaboration, sharing ideas and practice, and evaluating ideas impartially and without prejudice. This suggests a conflict between the core values of the sector and research ethos.

In many initiatives the question of whether research would truly embed itself across the sector was not posed; it was seen as a personal rather than sector level good. However, neither was the even more fundamental issue posed as to why there had been ongoing failures in sector CPD.

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What happens when core values are contested? What are we likely to see? We are most likely to see stakeholders and policy makers disagreeing about priorities, purposes and even assumptions in the respective policy field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

Here are three examples of differing accounts of CPD - its purpose, its impact, and its accountability.

Example one: What does CPD provide?

In 2022 the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) in a report titled *Training Needs Analysis* (Education and Training Foundation, 2022) provided a deep dive of what was happening in regard to CPD with extensive interviews with staff. ETF found that CPD comprised: (1) Daylong training sessions for all or many staff in an institution; (2) attendance at conferences and similar but smaller events; (3) training seminars or short courses; and (4) online or other distance learning (ETF, 2022, p. 34).

The ETF report provides a picture shared elsewhere in the literature (Hoskin, 2025; Jones, 2020) and indicates that "professionally developmental" forms of CPD, which Bathmaker and Avis's (2013) conceptualize as having a sense of autonomy and control over their work, are not being evidenced. Instead, respondents in the report explained that staff development was focused on such things as: Ofsted, responses to policy, critical and immediate challenges, such as literacy and numeracy. In short what Kennedy (2014, p. 690) refers to as "policy construct" CPD.

Example two: What is the purpose of CPD?

The 2018 College Staff Survey[1] (Department of Education, 2018), reveals a significant tension in the purpose of sector CPD. While teachers received 91% of training which matched college needs, teachers thought that they lacked progression opportunities (Department of Education, 2018, p. 48). This suggests training is short sighted and focused on immediate impact or policy rather than providing significant *professional* development that could lead to career development either within or without the sector. Data within the report suggests that this tension may have an impact on staff retention as sector leavers, on the whole, do not take up employment with better pay or more seniority. Rather, they leave for a range of negative reasons such as management style, policy turbulence, pay, or workload (Department of Education, 2018, p. 92). This tentatively points to the lack of focus on autonomy and the development of the professional rather than policy focused development, being an issue in the sector.

1 Please note more recent workforce survey data from the Department for Education no longer reports on CPD within the sector.

Example three: Who should be accountable?

Seven years later, the ETF gave evidence to the Select Committee on Increasing Teacher Numbers (Education and Training Foundation, 2025) and these issues resurfaced as the ETF argued that the following measures were needed to increase teacher numbers in the FE sector:

Strengthen professional standards (Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS)/Advanced Teacher Status (ATS)) to support parity of status with school and university educators.

Provide relevant and high quality CPD and structured mentoring to support teacher retention, build a sustainable workforce, and drive up the quality of teaching and leadership.

Train dual professionals as skilled educators whilst also helping them to retain deep and current technical knowledge so that their pedagogy is informed by evolving industry demands and technological advancements.

Recognize and support technical and vocational pedagogy as a national priority for workforce development.

The recently published comprehensive report on CPD (Boodt et al., 2025) further confirms that FE sector CPD is mostly generic, prioritizes mandatory and target driven indicators, and lacks ongoing and sustainable practices (see recommendations). Thus, showing that effective and whole staff engagement in CPD is still a major concern.

We are concerned that the ongoing systemic problems around CPD are continually ignored and that the active contribution made by #FEResearchmeets has not been fully understood as to why and how. Here, we argue that there is a thirst for CPD and research but that it has to match the expectations and ambitions of FE practitioners. The failures of previous attempts and the ad hoc character of current developments around CPD may need to heed some of the history lessons we would like to set out here. If not heeded, we fear we may see that the problem persists for another generation.

A History Lesson

In 2002 it was set out in legislation (Education Act 2002) that the forerunner to the ETF, the Institute for Learning (IfL), would lead the sector's workforce professional development. The strategy devised by IfL in consultation with the sector was that each member of IfL would complete a minimum of 30 mandatory CPD hours per year. The CPD would be devised by them and evidenced in a report to the IfL. (The Further Education Teachers' Continuing Professional Development and Registration (England) Regulations, 2007).

However, the CPD strategy proved problematic. By 2009 less than 50% of teacher and lecturer members declared their CPD (IfL, 2009). Moreover, the strategy was ignored by colleges according to the unions at the time in their submissions to Lord Lingfield (Professionalism in Education:

Interim Report 2012). The significance of the trade unions was that colleges were negotiating a new 'corporate' space that gave them autonomy in regard to finances and CPD (for the most part). They were able to renegotiate contracts and duties of staff as lecturers (UCU and ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers - now the National Education Union following a merger with the National Union of Teachers)) were the recognised lecturer trade unions and Unison (the public services union) for Support staff). The establishment of IfL added to this complex set of relationships that were yet to stabilise following the FEHE 1992 Act mentioned earlier.

The lack of impact of CPD activity generated issues with the IfL membership, especially when IfL was also mandated to become self-financing. Those who were members of the University and College Union (UCU) members rejected the proposed annual fee (£38), as they saw no benefit to being members of the embryonic professional body. Unison and ATL (as well as others, notably Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET)) observed the challenges but did not throw out the baby with the bathwater but argued for a reform of the IfL and would negotiate the fee possibilities (Unison negotiated a no fee membership for their members).

The Interim Report by Lord Lingfield (Professionalism in Education: Interim Report 2012) found that IfL had lost over 50% of membership and had lost the confidence of actors in the sector in their submissions to the Lingfield Report.

The Conservative Government, nevertheless, attempted a partnership deal to sustain IfL as a self-financing professional body. The Minister at the time (John Hayes) offered a partnership deal with each actor paying a third of the fee: members, government, and employer. Unfortunately, UCU could not put this offer to their members as the Employer body (AoC) would not commit to their third of the deal, as they believed they were already sufficiently supporting CPD and therefore professional development (see UCU General Secretary response (Hunt, 2022).

During this period the requirement to have mandatory teacher education qualifications was removed from the sector (Lord Lingfield Professionalism in Education: Final Report, 2012). However, the secondary sector which retains QTLS allowing support staff and vocational teachers to access professional pay and conditions via the equivalence of Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

QTLS was introduced to give parity of esteem to teachers with QTS a claim that is disputed by the limited literature on this area (Best et al., 2019). Later initiatives have been adopted such as Advanced Teacher Status and Chartered Institute of Further Education, but neither of these led to greater professional recognition in terms of pay or promotion nor to parity in terms of pay nor with teachers from other sectors.

Whichever side of the argument you are on, an opportunity was lost to potentially embed CPD in college life and culture. The IfL was disbanded. After much questioning about where it would go the unions were too traditional to take over a professional body – unlike the British Medical Association or Royal College of Nursing, therefore it was gifted to a new body to take the mantle, the ETF At this point, CPD and research became focused purely on professional qualifications and paid programmes.

In short, as the report into mathematics in FE Colleges found (Noyes & Dalby, 2020), no policy or quango in FE lives long enough to tell a tale. So, no policy impact in the sector is truly reflected on and redeveloped. Instead, the sector has a series of failed solutions precisely because they are seen as short-term solutions focused on policy decisions, rather than historical and dynamic strategies that seek to develop what Loy (2024) describes as occupational development, which is development led by the professional.

We think - as noted here - that the issue of CPD and research has deep roots. It is cultural, historical, and workforce related. Policy has generally placed other actors in the position of shaping the spaces around CPD and research in FE.

Outside these government-controlled organizations, bodies such as the Learning & Skills Research Network (LSRN) work collaboratively with sector practitioners, however, the LSRN is founded on the idea of value free research and an academic model, while #FEResearchmeets are founded on open inquiry, and practitioner-led interests. This does leave #FEResearchmeet open to accusations of lacking the rigor of academic research, but that is not its immediate focus or priority. Such research can develop later and already does in different spaces. What is more important is a space for *occupational teachers* to develop their interests, their practice, in a way that is facilitated by others *but not led by them*.

Vested interests and lack of foresight (and hindsight) have failed us before in this area, but a better strategy is needed to succeed this time. Which raises the question of why we believe that #FEResearchmeets are a viable solution?

#FEResearchmeets: A Mechanism for Development of Sector Practices

We believe #FEResearchmeets are an organic and direct response to the problem of professional development which the sector itself seems unable to resolve. #FEResearchmeets are a "free and democratic model for building and supporting engagement with research, led by practitioners" (Jones et al., 2024, p. 1); the meets themselves are typically hosted in FE colleges, bringing together different types of research and language from a variety of sector contexts and organizations. The sector-led and democratic nature of the spaces appears

to not only attract individuals to join the meets (Jones et al., 2024), but also to change the practice of their peers and that of the sector as a whole (Jones, 2025). Unfortunately, as the work does not form part of the workload of sector workers, the longer-term success of these initiatives does rely on the often unpaid work of the individual which is problematic.

According to Scattergood (2019) #FEResearchmeets was a mechanism though which participants could "reclaim *our* professional development". #FEResearchmeets gave participants the space to share work that was not found in other spaces, using a language that was much more familiar to the sector. According to Rose (2004) vocational vocabularies are reductive, simple words which may hide complex intelligences or actions. FE teachers have both an occupation or subject *and* teaching vocabulary available to them, and by welcoming the expression of ideas using these vocabularies #FEResearchmeets gives an opportunity for practitioners to explore ideas that convey the nuance and context which may be lost when these vocabularies are suppressed.

Moreover, #FEResearchmeet allows sector staff to demonstrate their leadership of problem identification and problem solving. For example, the first #FEResearchmeet had presentations of work into maths and English resits, sharing work that took place several years before the Department for Education and ETF developed the Centres for Excellence in Maths initiative. The early identification of this problem indicates that practitioners can identify and rectify challenges in their practice before they are taken up in larger scale initiatives, thereby creating new practice knowledge. Whilst it is important not to denigrate these larger initiatives, it is also equally important to reflect on the fact that they seldom, if ever, look to understand what practitioner work is taking place in this area before they solution seek in the way local initiatives do such as those discussed by Evett-Hackfort (2025) and Hyde et al. (2025). This begins to explain the attraction of spaces like #FEResearchmeets, they allow the practitioner to be heard and for their practice to be validated by other practitioners (Jones, 2025), repositioning themselves as the 'knowers' and developers of *occupational teaching* and creating for themselves the kinds of professional autonomy discussed by Bathmaker and Avis (2013).

Cost Effective, Sector Shaping Knowledge

People were able to attend #FEResearchmeets as they were free to access and often held in a local college. Meets on average cost no more than £400 to hold, which represents significant value as, as we will go on to argue, they have the possibility to impact both policy and practice in the sector.

It may be useful to compare #FEResearchmeet with the Further Educational Trust for Leadership (FETL). Created with £5.6m of legacy funding from the IfL, FETL was designed as a think tank for the sector. Although initially envisioned as an opportunity for FE practitioners to lead research (Staufenberg, 2021) concerns regarding time and opportunity meant the body instead used a model which reflected the thinking of bodies such as the Learning and Skills Development Agency and focused on knowledge and innovative thinking from academics from HE and leaders from FE. Whilst bringing together the "formal academic knowledge" of academics "practice knowledge-in-use" (Abbott, 1988) of FE leaders was perhaps more reflective of sector norms (Jones, 2025), the small number of Fellowships awarded to those who weren't senior leaders of academics could be argued to be normalizing others speaking for FE practitioners. This could be argued to point towards a narrow conception of leadership by FETL, which may indicate a perspective held by the wider sector, which was further exacerbated by the barriers identified by Staufenberg (2021). These difficulties in including FE practitioners in research may have been addressed if money had been found to support their engagement in the same way that it was provided for leadership of the project with executives paid up to £800 per day to lead the project (Staufenberg, 2021).

In contrast #FEResearchmeet uses the same two knowledge structures as FETL and actively encourages the two to be used "in parity" (Jones, 2025). #FEResearchmeet seeks to reposition practitioners as knowledge creators and decision makers, alongside their academic colleagues, arguing for a different warrant of knowledge through "their engagement in, understanding, and development of … practices" (Jones, 2025, p. 56). That is to say #FEResearchmeet gives practitioners the professional autonomy to validate their knowledge by sharing it with other practitioners, who, according to Hordern (2021) understand the practices well enough to judge their suitability to develop that practice. This is seen in narratives such as Evett-Hackfort (2025) who documents practice being replicated by different professionals across a college after coming into contact with it at a practitioner research event. This begins to shift the narrative that far from changing one person's practice, #FEResearchmeet has the capability to develop professionals and professionalism across the sector. However, the lack of scale and influence that initiatives like #FEResearchmeet has does limit their influence across a large and diverse sector.

Warranted Knowledge Moved Through Recontextualization

The past seven years has seen increasing numbers of publications exploring the practitioner research space (see, in chronological order, Lloyd & Jones, 2018; Shukie, 2020;

Knott, 2021; Cook et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2025; Evett-Hackfort, 2025; Scattergood & Jones, 2025; Hyde et al., 2025). They surface evidence for the influence and recontextualization of ideas and practices from the #FEResearchmeets which are less evident from other initiatives such as those previously discussed. For example, Jones (2018), Knott (2021), Jones et al. (2024), Evett-Hackfort (2025), and Barnes-Lomax (2025) all explore how contact with others from sector-led communities such as #FEResearchmeet has led participants to either change or create new communities or undertakings. Evett Hackfort (2025) documented how theorization shared at a #FEResearchmeet underpins the research initiative which runs across her college, whereas Barnes-Lomax (2025) discusses the sharing of "what worked and what didn't" developing practices in her college. This tentatively points to what Bernstein (2000) would argue is the creation of a *reservoir* of knowledge from which individual *repertoires* are being developed. This phenomenon has been documented in papers such as Lloyd and Jones (2018) which discuss the development of "pools of knowledge" within a college research community which is accompanied by new practices. This does suggest that spaces that facilitate practitioners' ownership of knowledge, recognizing them as 'knowers' (Jones, 2025) and using their vocabularies are developing and recontextualizing practice in ways that other initiatives may have been less able to evidence.

Beyond Recontextualization

Recent publications also indicate that there are far more systemic changes being made to the sector as a result of this activity. Jones and Scattergood (2025) record the development of roles which focus on the development of research within FE colleges themselves. Jones (2025) points to the growing number of FE practitioner-researchers attending academic conferences with an 11% rise in Association of Research in Post Compulsory Education (ARPCE) conference attendees originating from the sector between 2016 and 2024. At the point of writing 6 of the 7 organizers of the initial researchmeets documented by Jones et al. (2024) have gone on to gain, or are in the process of competing, a PhD. Many of the original #FEResearchmeet organizers have also become LSRN convenors or have joined other academic committees such as the ARPCE or the British Educational Research Association. This, in turn, has raised the profile of organizations with FE practitioners, who have swelled membership numbers and raised the profile of recent events, such as the revitalized LSRN conferences and recent ARPCE practitioner research events hosted in colleges. Moreover, it was organizers and participants of #FEResearchmeet that went on to form the Research College Group, which brought together a group of research-active post-16 organizations (Haig-Smith, 2021) with the intention of improving the visibility and use of practitioner research. These activities indicate that initiatives such as #FEResearchmeet have the ability to make change at a systemic or cultural level.

How Could #FEResearchmeet Benefit College Development?

Above we have demonstrated there is a persistent problem that we posit #FEResearchmeet is part of the solution to.

There are many benefits to #FEResearchmeet, which we have explored above, such as the reclaiming of professional development from within the sector and therefore ownership of expertise and the repositioning of practitioners as 'knowers'; the warrant of knowledge; the opportunity to collaborate not compete; and offering opportunities for the work to be utilized. As we have demonstrated, this has had the consequence of building a culture of research and collaboration across the sector.

However, unless there are further structural changes, then there is a possibility of other issues being embedded within the problem. The three main – but interlinked – identifiable issues are:

(1) Time (or a lack of it) afforded to practitioner research (Chen et al., 2025; Elliott, 1996, Solvason & Elliott, 2013).
(2) Use (Jones, 2025).
(3) Brain drain (Scattergood & Jones, 2025).

The issue of a paucity of time to undertake significant professional development such as practitioner research is a well-documented challenge which presents a significant challenge to sector staff creating an underpinning body of knowledge for their profession. This issue is compounded when the practitioner work itself is not used to inform pedagogy and practice in the sector, for example the practitioner research produced by the ETF's Outstanding Teaching, Learning, and Assessment initiative has never been analysed to understand how it could develop an underpinning body of knowledge for FE pedagogy. Further, work being unrecognized and unused by colleges and sector organizations could be argued to act as a push factor for researchers in the sector, leading to a brain drain as researchers seek environments more suited to their shifted identity and skills from practitioner to researcher, such as HE.

The opportunity to resolve these issues – and address the wider structural problems that have prevented FE professionalism being established – would afford the sector the chance to develop a culture of research. For too long,

colleges have treated practitioner research as a tool for professional development, without seeing the opportunities for practice-development, organizational development, or even sector development.

In a recent report for the ETF, Maylor et al. (2024) set out how to challenge problems within the sector at a strategic level. The purpose of the report is to address a need for: "the FE and Skills sector to be dynamic and sustainable, a system of continuously improving its practices and infrastructure to better meet the needs of learners, the job market and wider society" (p. 10).

Within the report, research-informed practice is described as a significant pillar of self-sustaining improvement (Maylor et al., 2024), in order to achieve this the sector needs to develop an evidence base. The grassroots model of CPD and research we argue can be part of solving this problem. But without financial investment in developing a culture of research in the sector, this work will continue as a form of 'activism' at best and rest on the shoulders only of those who are motivated to make change. The lack of financial investment leaves the sector vulnerable to blocking the stream of work through time constraints, struggling to develop an evidence base due to the lack of 'use' of practitioner work and ultimately losing those willing to address this problem to other sectors.

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About the Authors

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Norman Crowther (PhD, MA (Literature), MA (Creative Writing), BA Hons (First), Cert.ED) is currently working on an OU project into FE and Social Partnership. He retired from the NEU as the National Official for Post 16 Education in 2023. He worked for the NEU for 16 years. Before working for the NEU, Norman worked in an FE College for 13 years as a Curriculum Quality Manager and Lecturer. Norman has contributed widely to the post 16 sector as a member of the ETF Workforce Expert Panel and LSRN Chairing Group. Norman developed partnerships and co-working arrangements with all major stakeholders and employers during his time at NEU. Norman also developed co-working arrangements with various academics and political figures such as: Diane Dalby (Nottingham University), Lorna Unwin (UCL) and Alison Fuller (UCL); Chris Winch (UCL) and Mark Addis (OU), and Lord Glassman (Social Partnership). He helped develop and lead the Transformers' Project for NEU which aimed to support employer engagement in the FE sector. Norman has published a number of co-authored papers on social partnership, expertise and embodiment in VET (forthcoming Springer ed. Sai Loo).

Dr. Samanatha (Sam) Jones

Dr. Samantha (Sam) Jones worked as a lecturer, teacher educator, author and researcher in FE for 20 years, winning the 2019 TES FE Teacher of the Year, writing a fortnightly column for TES FE, and co-creating the Bedford College Group Research Network, #FEResearchmeet and the Research College Group. Sam now works at the University of Hertfordshire as Principal Lecturer. She still advocates for, and researches practitioner-research in FE, focusing on knowledge validation and power. She has recently published a book which examines these issues - *Exploring practitioner research in Further Education* with Kerry Scattergood, a follow up to Great FE Teaching: Sharing Good Practice which illustrates the complexity of teaching in the sector, foregrounding FE teachers' ownership of their practice, knowledge, and pedagogical choices.

Dr. Kerry Scattergood

Dr. Kerry Scattergood is a senior lecturer and FE Research Lead at Solihull College & University Centre, with over two decades teaching experience. Kerry has a passion for advancing practitioner research across the sector, with a research interest in epistemology in FE. She is a founding member and the current chair of the Research College Group, a network of colleges that foster a culture of research in further education. She recently co-edited *Exploring practitioner research in Further Education* with Dr. Sam Jones.