

Research in view

Inside Evidence interviewed Ann Hodgson, an influential researcher in the learning and skills sector, for her views on the quality of teaching and learning and current challenges



Ann Hodgson has many years experience of conducting research into post-16 education issues, and argues that much has been achieved in the past few years. She points to the fact that investment in resources has resulted in new buildings and equipment, and smaller class sizes. She is also very heartened by the dramatic improvement in collaboration between providers (driven by government and the 14-19 agenda). And still with the 14-19 curriculum, New Diplomas, she says, are making an impact across the board, from generating innovative pedagogy to alternative approaches to timetabling. Ann also highlights the growth of professionalism within the sector which has meant everyone now has to have a qualification and a focus on apprenticeships which have helped young people to relate to a programme designed for them.

There are significant challenges ahead

However she believes that there are still significant challenges facing education professionals. For her, a major one is quality. The focus in recent years has really been on getting learners through examinations rather than on the quality of their experience. “Our research *The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the Learning and Skills Sector, 2003-2007*¹ shows that the focus has been more on meeting targets and accountability than the quality of learning and teaching”.

Ann points to another challenge, which is that “we still have a really divided system in terms of who gets what out of education and training”. There continues to be more money spent on the top end of the system (level 3 learners and higher education learners) than those who are entry or level 1 or even level 2 in colleges. And there is still a big difference between the learner experience in terms of the facilities they have and the amount of money that is spent on them if they are in work based learning or a further education college rather than a school.

Another issue for Ann is that practice should affect policy, but at the moment she says, it doesn’t. She claims that it seems to be always the job of researchers and practitioners to make their research known to policy makers. She argues that responsibility lies on both sides to ensure that effective policy is supported by research. “Policy makers should be interested as part of the whole political

and deliberative cycle to work with the views of practitioners and researchers as part of the policy process”. She cites the example of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme² which has shown, there are no real feedback loops that impact on policy in any kind of formalised way. “The idea that when policy is being formulated you involve practitioners because they know what will work with the learners they encounter day in day out just doesn’t seem to be how things are done”.

The value of getting involved in research

Reading about research is not enough: in Ann’s experience there is no substitute for practitioners getting involved. “Once they get involved” she says, “practitioners can begin to see for themselves how research can be used as part of their practice and indeed how practice can inform research and policy”. She adds that working collaboratively with other practitioners or researchers generates the kind of enthusiasm that only happens when practitioners are genuinely talking about teaching and learning “rather than about broken toilets, discipline or the latest policy wheeze”.

But practitioners are getting more involved with research. Ann points to the PGCE post compulsory programmes carried out in conjunction with universities, which means that “staff are in touch with research in ways they never have been before. That must be an important stimulus for change and development”. She believes that practitioner research should be a central part of any kind of staff development and curriculum development. “Too often it’s seen as something separate, that is done outside the institution. Staff development is something which should be brought inside. More people should be involved in research whether small scale or as part of larger projects to keep them constantly refreshing their skills and knowledge and becoming better practitioners”.

Research is out there in “huge amounts” and is now easily accessible in a way that even two to three years ago was not the case. It is a question of knowing particular websites where you can go to on a regular basis to see the latest updates – such as the General Teaching Council’s Research for Teachers website³, the Education Evidence Portal⁴ and the Excellence Gateway⁵.

¹www.tlrp.org/proj/phase111/coffield.htm

²See for example, www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/FEcommentary.pdf

³www.gtce.org.uk/teachers/rft/

⁴www.eep.ac.uk

⁵www.excellencegateway.org.uk/research



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