Non-Technical Summary:

Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education

The quality of learning in FE is threatened. This research identified the main causes of this threat, developed a better way to understand learning in FE and a new approach to improving that learning.

1) Learning Cultures in FE

Learning in FE is influenced by:

• The positions, dispositions and actions of students
• The positions, dispositions and actions of tutors
• The location and resources of the site
• The syllabus/course, assessment and qualification specifications
• The interrelationships between tutors and students
• College management procedures, together with funding and inspection requirements and government policy
• Wider vocational and academic cultures
• Societal values and practices, e.g. concerning class, gender, ethnicity, the nature of employment, family life, and the status of FE.

Each interacts with the others. Each can change, the relationships between them can change, and changes to one can result in changes to any of the others. Each impacts in different ways on different parts of FE. Thus, learning in FE is relational, for no single factor can be isolated from any of the others, or is always more significant than any of the others. The combination of these interrelationships creates a learning culture: the practices which comprise learning in any site.

Learning cultures are complex and individuals participating within them differ, so there are variations of learning within any learning culture, and there are wide variations between learning cultures within FE. For FE as a whole, there are four key features:

(i) The central significance of the tutor in learning. However, some tutors were more independent than others and had more influence and room to manoeuvre. Some were teaching on courses that they created – some on courses they disapproved of.

(ii) FE caters for students looking for a second chance in education, which reinforces its low status. Status impacts on different courses in different ways, which can be detrimental for those on lower status routes.

(iii) Learning in FE is threatened by unstable funding and a rigid audit regime, focused on retention, achievement and inspection standards. Tutors strove to protect the existing learning cultures from external damage – such as reductions in class contact time and imposed register systems that did not fit with effective patterns of learning. This entailed extensive underground working, as tutors routinely worked well beyond their official job descriptions.

(iv) Pressures to improve teaching and learning in FE are externally driven, by demands that the sector provides effective responses to some of the
country’s major social, employment and economic needs, with ever-decreasing resources.

2) **Students as learners**

Students help construct the learning culture and their participation in those cultures contributes to personal development. Variations in the positions and dispositions of students within a culture affect their learning. Student dispositions are deep-seated, partly tacit and influenced by experiences outside FE. One purpose of education is to extend and challenge existing dispositions.

Policy currently concentrates on qualification achievement, but for many students this was not the most significant learning outcome. Issues of personal growth and change were unacknowledged in formal assessments. Such informal learning outcomes were significant, though not always beneficial. Nursery nurses learned to become effective practitioners, but also had their low status, gendered and low-paid identities confirmed. In AS psychology, some students learned to succeed and to enjoy their new academic knowledge. Others learned that psychology was beyond them, and consequently lost confidence.

3) **Interventions to improve learning**

Tutors made three types of intervention into the learning cultures:

i) Interventions for improvement. Success depended in part upon whether they increased the synergy between elements of the learning culture.

ii) Interventions to mitigate negative change. These occurred when managerial changes threatened valued parts of the learning culture.

iii) Interventions for ‘exit’. In the face of what they felt were intolerable circumstances, some good tutors left FE altogether.

Some of the most significant interventions impacting upon learning originated from sector-wide policy changes, e.g. to the funding mechanism; or from major college level changes, such as mergers, staffing reorganisations, external inspections or crises in funding. The impact of such interventions on learning was often harmful.

**Improving Learning in FE**

This project concentrated on the potential for improvement of learning from inside FE. We identified four potential drivers:

**Student interests.** Students’ needs are not simply passing qualifications and getting a job – though these were goals for many. Students want to enjoy their learning and to balance their studies with other personal priorities. Some improvements in learning require acknowledgment that students may legitimately want things that policy makers do not currently value.

1) **Tutors’ professionalism.** If the reservoir of tutor professionalism were recognised and enhanced, improvements in learning would follow. This entails creating space for tutor autonomy and collaboration;
rewarding and supporting creativity, imagination and innovation; challenging and extending existing practices.

2) Pedagogy. Teaching is an art. Often the good pedagogy we observed did not completely fit the criteria set out for national standards and inspection, and what worked well for one tutor in one culture, might not work for a different tutor, or in a different culture. Greater support for excellent pedagogy that is particular to a tutor’s personal professional judgement and is sensitive to the nature of the particular learning culture, should be combined with staff development strategies that encourage sharing of expertise.

3) Taking a Cultural View of Learning. Learning cultures should be considered as a whole. Improving learning cultures requires actions by different types of players. At minimum, our evidence suggests that actions by government and other national bodies, college managers (senior and middle), tutors (including the various types of paraprofessional), and ideally students themselves. A major way of improving the effectiveness of learning is to increase synergy between the factors influencing any learning culture.

It is necessary to manage improvements to learning without undue reliance on universal approaches or measured outputs. This can be done through nationally established principles of procedure, setting out approaches to improving learning at all levels. We produced a draft of such principles. We produced a draft of such principles (Annex 4).