

Research for an uncertain world

Building capacity for change through research...

At the University of Hertfordshire, the School of Education's research activity relates strongly to the interests of policymakers and practitioners. Our focus is on driving up standards through building capacity so that individuals and groups within organisations improve their practice and acquire the research skills to underpin their continuing development. Learning through research provides a space to stand back and reflect. It is a work-based process, self-directed and enabling, leading to individual and organisational flexibility that is fundamental to success in a changing environment. Learning, rather than training, is required to enable individuals and organisations to meet current

demands and face future challenges. In an uncertain world, building capacity for change through research provides the basis that underpins agility, confidence and a positive response to new opportunities.

Working through practice-based enquiry and research is a process that has a significant influence on individuals and organisations; collaboration with others generates powerful impact, invariably including additional unplanned but important benefits for all concerned. We work alongside our partners in business, criminal justice, education, health and social care to produce work that is independent and of excellent quality using a range of methodological approaches. The School of Education's

expertise is based on our research into the nature of professional learning and work related learning, and the means by which it is supported. This expertise complements profession or occupation-specific research and underpins our projects with external organisations.

Our approach to building capacity means that participants in these organisations are directly involved in the research and see themselves as co-enquirers rather than subjects of the research. The projects in which they are engaged directly inform their development, generate maximum impact of research on practice, and build capacity in the organisation. Broader dissemination is key to audiences of managers, practitioners



and policymakers, as well as to the academic community.

We work in partnership to build the capacity of individuals and organisations in many different ways, represented in the examples below. These include co-leading collaborative projects with local authorities and other agencies in response to their prioritised needs; in some instances, projects have developed from preliminary work with us, which has enabled an organisation to identify those issues that are most important. Our approach to collaboration includes a commitment to ensuring that the process culminates in presentations of the research specifically designed

to help members of the organisation engage with the results – thereby maximising the impact.

Other projects contribute to the development of policy and practice at local, regional, national and international levels. We have found that an initial small-scale project often leads to others being undertaken in different parts of an organisation, helping to create a sustainable culture of research that improves the quality of decision-making.

Building capacity through collaboration is a principle that is important to us, an approach we, and those with whom we work, find both cost-effective and

easily maintained over the longer term. Our values, experience and aptitudes enable us to engage flexibly in new ways with different sorts of partners; working across the boundaries of roles and professions is part of our expertise – one which we are committed to developing still further.

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The projects and partnerships we invest in engage not only our expertise as researchers but our energy and commitment as professionals. Ensuring that the focus of the work is worthwhile, resonating with our principles and practice, guarantees quality of both process and outcome. For example, the theme of equity and diversity is strongly represented in the list of projects we are involved with.

Our goal is to build capacity with individuals and organisations, enabling them to continually develop their practice and improve outcomes. In the current turbulent context, this approach is particularly valuable, so we continue to engage with our partners in research for an uncertain world.

Collaborative organisational improvement:

- Enabling a probation service to examine how its work impacts on the behaviour of prolific offenders;
- Exploring with a group of managers from a drug and alcohol team practitioners' perceptions of the nature and extent of sexual exploitation of young people;
- Working with a teenage pregnancy strategy team to evaluate an intervention supporting young people who have been identified as being particularly vulnerable;
- Supporting consultants from an ethnic minority and traveller achievement service on action research projects designed to improve the experience and attainment of specific groups of children.

Policy development:

- A project to enable pupils with severe and complex needs to participate in the national pupil voice initiative;
- Developing and trialling an intervention strategy as part of an education programme in a young offenders centre – this strategy is now used in many secure units for young people and prisons for adults;
- Investigation of new forms of educational organisation and leadership – free schools, University Technical College and the private sector;
- Collaboratively developing teacher training with the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, to establish a policy of graduate teachers in the primary school sector.

Led by values:

- A training programme using non-verbal communication methodologies to improve the response of NHS staff to patients' violent outbursts;
- A 'toolkit' used by fostering service providers in training to help them engage with 'hard to reach' carers, especially men;
- Understanding how cross-community development of music skills with young people in Northern Ireland works as an effective means of addressing prejudice;
- Strategies for working with disadvantaged and under-represented groups in higher education in the UK and India.



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