

SHARE & EXCHANGE KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS

Project: Pioneering Further Education Research Across the UK

Historically, academic research within general and vocational Further Education (FE) colleges had not been actively encouraged or developed. Research being undertaken tended to be in silos and not shared openly or disseminated widely across the sector. This limited the reach and benefit of the small amount of high-quality research work that was being done.

The Bedford College Group's Advanced Practitioner, Samantha Jones, wanted to change this, and over the past four years, she has been pioneering FE research and knowledge development through academic research and scholarship activities, supported at the highest level within the Group.

In 2015, Samantha pioneered a new form of assessment on the PGCE course she taught, adopting the poster conference concept usually seen in higher education and not previously at FE level. The poster assessment is now a well-established part of the action research unit of the Group's PGCE courses, with all students required to display work at a poster conference, promoting student knowledge transfer.



Picture shows Catherine Lloyd, Dr Matthew Horne, Charles Whewell and Samantha Jones of The Bedford College Group

What was also far-reaching about this approach was that the PGCE poster conferences helped update the practice of existing, qualified teaching staff at the College in terms of continual professional development and keeping up-to-date with new techniques and approaches.

By June 2017, the Bedford College Research Network had been set up using the poster conference approach as a springboard to connect with peers across the county, launching the UK's first FE Research Meet in Bedfordshire. This Research Meet provided a space for FE lecturers to share and discuss their research. Five pieces of research were shared at this first meeting and 40 FE lecturers attended.

In July 2018, Samantha organised the second Bedfordshire FE Research Meet, building upon the success of the previous year. This Research Meet saw more than 15 pieces of FE research shared and 65 FE staff from across the county attended.

The FE Research Meets were such a success that in 2018, peers from across UK FE Colleges were inspired to organise their own, regional Research Meets in Bristol and Greater Manchester, with funding and support from the National Education Union.

In 2021, The Bedford College Group was involved in launching the UK's Research College Group representing 10 founder General Further Education and Sixth Form colleges who lead in practitioner research. These organisations aim to bring practitioner and other forms of post-16 education and training research, into the heart of sector organisations.

This collaborative endeavour is run by, and for, the sector seeking to raise the profile and value of post-16 education and training through its research undertaken within its own community, and by leading the development of research and enquiry that reflect the requirements of the sector.



The 10 founder member organisations are: Activate Learning, Ashton Sixth Form College (Stamford Park Trust), Better Futures MAT (Bilborough Sixth Form), Hartlepool College, Coleg Sir Gar and Coleg Ceredigion, Lincoln College, Solihull College and University Centre, One Sixth Form, The Bedford College Group and York College. Founder individual members are Sara-Jane Crowson, Roy Halpin, Peter Shukie and Amy Woodrow.

Recent outcomes from research undertaken by staff at The Bedford College Group include:

- 120 academic posters shared research findings with colleagues across the FE sector
- 24 articles written for Times Educational Supplement (TES)
- 14 pieces of work published on the College blog
- Nine staff participated in teaching knowledge exchanges
- Staff have contributed to five books
- Staff have presented at five conferences
- One staff member published an award-winning journal article on middle management in FE.

Jo Fletcher-Saxon, Assistant Principal at Ashton Sixth Form College said: “With Samantha’s support I launched a Research Meet in the north and our College is now a Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN) hub supporting experiments or action research to improve outcomes for learners and pedagogical practice.”

Kerry Longo, Senior Personal Tutor at Bedford College said: “When Samantha mentioned she was setting up the Bedford College Research Network and that it was open to both teaching and support staff at the College I was very interested to undertake some research again, as I had not conducted any research since my degree. I wanted to have some formal feedback from the students and test my own practice – to understand more about how the students felt and how engaging they found the activities. I surveyed over 100 students and presented my findings at the first Bedfordshire Research Meet in 2017.”

Michael Worthington, Careers Adviser at Bedford College said: “When I heard about the Bedford College Research Network I contacted Samantha to discuss a piece of action research I wanted to undertake to support my professional development. I wanted to look at improving career guidance with autistic students and specifically testing whether conducting two separate interviews was beneficial for this group of students.”



Picture shows Samantha Jones, Georgina Ager and Mark Tinney of The Bedford College Group.