



## **Embedding contextualisation in English and mathematics GCSE teaching**

Pilot Report

July 2019

### **Independent evaluators:**

Johnny Runge, NIESR, Naomi Munro-Lott (formerly NIESR)  
and Jonathan Buzzeo (formerly NIESR)





# J.P.Morgan

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is an independent grant-making charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement, ensuring that children from all backgrounds can fulfil their potential and make the most of their talents.

The EEF aims to raise the attainment of children facing disadvantage by:

- identifying promising educational innovations that address the needs of disadvantaged children in primary and secondary schools in England;
- evaluating these innovations to extend and secure the evidence on what works and can be made to work at scale; and
- encouraging schools, government, charities, and others to apply evidence and adopt innovations found to be effective.

The EEF was established in 2011 by the Sutton Trust as lead charity in partnership with Impetus Trust (now part of Impetus - Private Equity Foundation) and received a founding £125m grant from the Department for Education. Together, the EEF and Sutton Trust are the government-designated What Works Centre for improving education outcomes for school-aged children.

For more information about the EEF or this report please contact:

 Jonathan Kay  
Education Endowment Foundation  
5th Floor, Millbank Tower  
21–24 Millbank  
SW1P 4QP

 0207 802 1653

 [jonathan.kay@eefoundation.org.uk](mailto:jonathan.kay@eefoundation.org.uk)

 [www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk](http://www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)



## Contents

<b>About the evaluator.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Executive summary.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Methods .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Findings.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Appendix 1: AELP/MEI outline of training days .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) example .....</b>	<b>32</b>

## **About the evaluator**

The evaluation was conducted by a team at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) was led by Johnny Runge, with support from Naomi Munro-Lott (formerly at NIESR) and Jonathan Buzzeo (formerly at NIESR).

## Executive summary

### The project

The pilot intervention 'Embedding contextualisation in English and mathematics GCSE teaching' trains English and maths teachers to use examples from real life and vocational contexts in their teaching to emphasise the relevance of studies to the future careers of students. The aim is to improve students' motivation and engagement, leading to improvements in retention and attainment. The intervention is developed by the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) and Mathematics in Education and Industry (MEI).

The intervention is aimed at students who achieved below a grade 4 in their English and/or maths GCSE in the previous academic year and are resitting the course for the first time. The intervention was piloted within six further education providers during the 2017/2018 academic year.<sup>1</sup> The main component of the intervention was four face-to-face training days which took place between June 2017 and February 2018. On the training days, teachers were introduced to the aims of the intervention and the concept of contextualised learning, there was a review of existing benchmark practices, they developed an action plan, and trainers supported English and maths teachers in developing their own contextualisation resources. In addition, support was provided through remote support sessions and an online contextualisation toolkit with information about how to make use of contextualisation in teaching.

The aim of the pilot evaluation was to test the feasibility of the programme, its evidence of promise, and its potential readiness for trial. The pilot was funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) as part of a joint initiative with J.P. Morgan to explore how to improve outcomes for disadvantaged 16- to 18-year-old students who achieve below a grade 4 in GCSE English or maths.

#### Key Conclusions

1. Overall, the increase in the use of contextualised learning in the classroom was limited and it was therefore difficult for teachers to assess whether the intervention had an impact on outcomes like retention and attainment.
2. The intervention helped to raise the profile of contextualisation among teachers and senior leaders. Further education teachers and senior leaders generally supported the idea of using contextualised learning to improve pupil motivation and believed in the potential of this type of intervention.
3. Teachers reported concerns about the challenge of applying contextualised knowledge to a non-contextualised GCSE exam. They also reported students' tendency to respond better to real-life, rather than vocational, contextualisation due to a lack of interest in their vocational area.
4. The intervention required teachers to attend four full-day training sessions. This was considered to be a significant investment, and may have been more attractive for settings if the training days had been more time-effective and were shown to have proven impact.
5. If the intervention is taken forward for wider rollout, it needs significant changes. These could include the provision of additional resources, changes to the structure of sessions, and more clarity about the expectations of participating staff.

### What are the findings?

The evaluation found some evidence to support the theory of change, particularly in relation to putting contextualisation on the agenda among teachers and senior leaders by increasing awareness of contextualisation techniques and providing a platform for teachers to develop better lesson plans and resources. However, the increase in the use of contextualised learning had been limited at the time the pilot evaluation was completed. At the time of the data collection, therefore, it was difficult for teachers to assess any perceived impact on student outcomes such as retention and attainment.

Providers emphasised that this was only the start of a longer process to embed contextualisation in the classroom and, in many cases, the training was perceived to have given a good foundation for this journey. There was strong support among teachers and senior leaders for the general idea of using contextualised learning in GCSE English and maths

<sup>1</sup> In this report, 'providers' refers to the further education colleges delivering the intervention, not those that authored the programme and provided training and support.

to improve motivation and retention, and a belief in the potential of this type of intervention, though it was often emphasised that some issues needed to be addressed to realise this potential. The evaluation identified a number of key barriers and formative findings:

- The time commitment required to deliver the intervention was perceived to be substantial, and participants discussed how to make the intervention more time-effective, for example, by providing a bank of existing contextualisation resources at the start of the intervention or shortening training days.
- The evaluation revealed mixed experiences of students' ability to apply their contextualised knowledge to the non-contextualised GCSE exam papers. Some teachers also pointed out that they had limited time in each GCSE lesson to cover the syllabus and that their priority had to be to prepare students for the (non-contextualised) GCSE exam.
- Teachers often observed that students were more engaged when the contextualised learning applied to everyday situations rather than future vocations due to a lack of interest in the latter.
- The role of vocational practitioners and employment coordinators, which varied substantially across settings, needs to be more clearly defined in any subsequent rollout.

## How was the pilot conducted?

Six further education colleges participated in, and completed, the pilot intervention. They were located across England and included a mixture of college sizes and types. The pilot programme included fieldwork visits to all six during which the evaluation team conducted interviews and focus groups with key personnel and observed at least one English or maths lesson in which contextualisation was used. In addition, the evaluation team observed all four training days across three of the colleges.

The evaluation assessed whether the intervention was seen as feasible and realistic to implement, identified barriers to implementation, explored perceived impacts on pupil outcomes like retention and attainment, and gathered views on how the intervention might be improved to inform potential future rollout. Due to the limited progress in implementation at the time, planned collection of outcome data did not occur.

Table 1: Summary of pilot findings

Question	Finding	Comment
<b>Is there evidence to support the theory of change?</b>	Mixed	There is some evidence that the project raised awareness of contextualisation among teachers and senior leaders. However, there was limited increase in the use of contextualised learning post training. This meant that it was difficult to assess the impact of the intervention on pupil outcomes.
<b>Was the approach feasible?</b>	Mixed	All providers completed the training days, though with substantial variation in the number and proportion of participating teachers. Providers generally supported the idea of using contextualised learning to improve pupil motivation, however, the evaluation identified a number of barriers including the high time commitment required, concerns about students' ability to apply contextualised knowledge in the non-contextualised GCSE exam, and some students' lack of interest in their vocational area.
<b>Is the approach ready to be evaluated in a trial?</b>	No	Changes need to be made to the intervention before it is ready to be trialled. These changes may include the provision of additional resources, changes to the structure of sessions, and more clarity over the expectations of participating staff.

## Introduction

### Intervention

The intervention was developed by the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) and Mathematics in Education and Industry (MEI) building on resources developed and used in a previous project aimed at helping teachers improve their use of contextualised learning by using real-life and vocational contexts to make the content seem more relevant. The project was funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) as part of a joint initiative with J.P. Morgan to explore how to improve outcomes for disadvantaged 16- to 18-year-old students without a 4 (previously a C) or above in GCSE English or maths.<sup>2</sup>

The target group of this intervention are students who achieved below a grade 4 in their English and/or maths GCSE in the previous academic year and are resitting the course for the first time. The intervention trains English and maths teachers to make fuller and better use of contextualisation as part of their techniques. This is based on the premise that the use of appropriate contextualised learning related to students' future careers will enhance its perceived relevance to students and improve their motivation and engagement with English and maths, which in turn will feed into improvements in student outcomes such as retention and attainment.

The intervention was piloted within six further education providers during the 2017/2018 academic year. The main component of the intervention was four face-to-face training days delivered and facilitated by two trainers employed by AELP and MEI—one for English and one for maths. The primary focus of the training was English and maths teachers, but, in order to be most effective, it was envisaged that other staff members needed to be engaged to support dissemination throughout the provider. In addition to the maths and English teachers, it was expected that the core team would include a member of senior management (who would act as a 'project champion' whose main responsibility was to organise training days and liaise with trainers), vocational practitioners, and employment coordinators.

A detailed structure of individual training days can be found in Appendix 1; this also shows the required attendance of individual staff groups. Broadly, Day 1 was used to introduce participants to the intervention aims and the concept of contextualisation; trainers also sought to benchmark existing practices and participants started to develop an action plan for how they would embed contextualisation into their teaching practices. Day 2 further explored the use of contextualisation and participants started developing contextualisation resources. On Day 3, participants continued their development of resources, and part of the day involved vocational practitioners and employment coordinators. Day 4 was used to reflect on and evaluate the pilot intervention and discuss how teachers could take contextualisation forward in their settings. This can be summarised as follows:

- Day 1—introduction to contextualisation, benchmarking current approaches, developing action plan;
- Day 2—reflection on the use of contextualisation, development of own resources;
- Day 3—development of own resources, working with vocational practitioners/employment coordinators; and
- Day 4—reflection, way forward.

According to the project specifications, support would also be provided through a series of remote support sessions in between training days to assist implementation, including the use of phone or conference calls, face-to-face meetings, email contact, and less formal social media interaction. Project champions would be encouraged to regularly interact with their trainer in between training days, and there would also be a face-to-face day involving the project champion and the facilitator/subject lead. In addition, English and maths teachers would receive a contextualisation toolkit with information and ideas about how to make use of contextualisation in their teaching, and, towards the end of the pilot evaluation period, would have access to a Dropbox folder with shared contextualised resources.

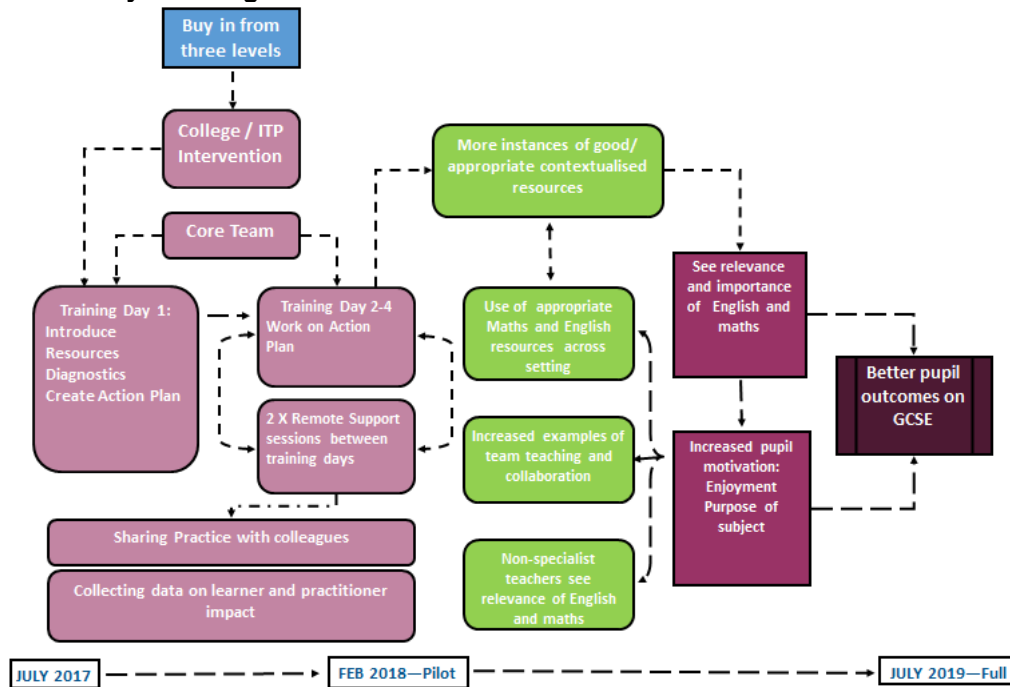
Prior to implementation, AELP and MEI developed the following theory of change model (Figure 1) outlining how the intervention was expected to impact on pupil outcomes. Broadly, it shows how the input (purple boxes)—especially the training days and the sharing of practices outside training—are theorised to feed into more instances of appropriate contextualised learning in provider settings (green boxes). This will, in turn, lead to better pupil outcomes (red boxes)—

---

<sup>2</sup><https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/new-5m-fund-to-improve-maths-and-english-results-for-young-people-without-g/>

such as increased awareness of the relevance/importance of English and maths, enjoyment, and motivation—leading to better GCSE outcomes including attainment and retention.

**Figure 1: Theory of change model**



## Background evidence

To the knowledge of the evaluation team, no pre-existing evidence base exists for an intervention focused on training teachers in making fuller and better use of contextualised learning in GCSE English and maths for students who are resitting for the first time. There exists broad evidence that embedding maths and English into vocational and real-life contexts may be highly valuable and enable students to understand abstract concepts—and improve motivation and retention (The Education and Training Foundation, 2014). In addition, an EEF-commissioned literature review found that integrated, contextualised mathematics is more accessible and engaging to vocational students who struggle with GCSE than a more traditional academic approach (Maughan et al., 2016).

In the above study, there was a similar emerging finding for English. However, this was based on relatively weak evidence and involved a different cohort of students to those compulsorily re-sitting. In addition, there remains a body of opinion that a functional skills qualification is better suited for contextualised learning practices than a GCSE due to the applied, rather than the theoretical, content (Higton et al., 2017). This project aimed to test to what extent contextualised learning can be used effectively for students who are resitting GCSE and whether teachers of these students can be supported to develop their practice. It also aimed to assess to what extent teachers perceived contextualised learning to have improved attainment and other outcomes for students.

## Research questions

The aim of this evaluation was to assess whether the pilot intervention showed evidence to support the theory of change, was feasible for providers to deliver, and could be replicated, scaled, and tested as part of a larger efficacy trial. The evaluation aimed to answer the following, more detailed, research questions in each of these areas in order to direct the collection of evidence and show whether these conditions had been met:

- Evidence of promise:
  - Has there been an increase in appropriate contextualised learning at provider sites that can be attributed to participating in the pilot?



- Is there evidence to suggest that embedding contextualisation in post-16 English and maths can have a positive impact on pupil retention?
- Do settings perceive a change in work practices from engaging in the intervention?
- Do participants believe that the intervention has had (or will have) benefits to students compared to practices being used before?
- Is the intervention a worthwhile investment from the perspective of management?
- Feasibility:
  - Is the intervention feasible for staff at providers to engage in and implement?
- Readiness for trial:
  - Do the training and resources constitute a standard intervention that can be scaled up?
  - Is it possible to identify those students directly taught by a trained practitioner as well as those indirectly exposed to the intervention?

## Changes from the protocol

Within each of the three main areas, a number of evaluation criteria were formulated. Initially, it was agreed between the evaluation team, the EEF, and the delivery team that these evaluation criteria would assist the project funders to decide whether to continue to a main trial. The criteria for this decision are outlined below, showing how they initially aimed to quantify how many providers had achieved each evaluation criteria. However, after the evaluation team had completed its fieldwork—including observations and interviews with providers—it was decided to provide only indicative estimates of most of these, focusing instead on a thorough qualitative account of any findings related to the evaluation criteria and the key themes. The reasons for this are given in the section on ‘limitations’ in the conclusion of this report.

In addition, a number of the original evaluation criteria were not addressed. The first omitted criterion concerned the future practicality of the intervention as a randomised controlled trial. Specifically, this criterion aimed to explore the feasibility of identifying those students who had attended classes taught by teachers who had attended the training days. This part of the evaluation was not undertaken as the EEF has done similar work as part of other trials. The second omitted criterion aimed to explore whether retention rates improved during the course of the pilot evaluation. This was not assessed due to the limited progress in implementation during the evaluation period.

Table 2: Evaluation criteria

Question	Evidence criteria
Is there evidence to support the theory of change?	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Qualitative</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Do most sites* perceive a change in working practices from engaging in the intervention—for example, can they give two or more examples of English and maths practitioners and employment coordinators working together, outside of training, to develop contextualised resources or cascade learning?</li> <li>● Have most sites seen benefits from participating in the intervention, or would they expect to do so in the following 12 months?</li> <li>● Do Senior Management Team (SMT) members from most sites believe the intervention to be a worthwhile investment and would they recommend it to other providers?</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Quantitative</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Is there a 5% improvement in the average retention rate for students undertaking GCSE resits in English and maths at each site over the trial period compared with the previous year (2016/2017)? [Not assessed due to limited progress in implementation during evaluation period.]</li> </ul>

<p>Was the approach feasible?</p>	<p><i>Qualitative</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do most sites believe the actions recommended are realistic and feasible to implement? (This will be based on whether members of the core team believe they have had sufficient training, support, time, and engagement from other staff to implement the agreed actions.)</li> </ul> <p><i>Quantitative</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the required members of the core team attend each training day, as outlined in the programme journey?</li> <li>• Does no more than one site withdraw from the pilot?</li> </ul>
<p>Readiness for trial</p>	<p><i>Qualitative—Do the training and resources constitute a standard intervention that can be scaled up?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do most sites believe the training days and resources do not require any structural changes in order to achieve the intended outcomes? (For example, that attendees felt that the content and/or length of the training was appropriate and helpful in assisting them to make fuller and better use of contextualisation within their organisation.)</li> <li>• Do the training days contain the same identifiable components—for example, sessions and activities—when delivered across different sites in line with the programme journey developed by AELP?</li> </ul> <p><i>Quantitative: trial practicality—Can the students be identified by the data?</i> [Not assessed because the EEF has done this work as part of other trials.]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are details about the providers and teachers obtainable early on, before randomisation (needed if this goes to impact evaluation)? [Not assessed.]</li> <li>• Is it possible to identify the students directly taught by the trained teachers as well as those indirectly exposed to the intervention? [Not assessed.]</li> <li>• Can we assess the relevance of the outcome measures for the intervention students identified in the pilot? [Not assessed.]</li> </ul>

\* 'Most sites' is defined as at least four out of six.

## Ethical review

The participating providers all signed a Memorandum of Understanding at the start of the intervention. This provided guidelines as to what was expected throughout the intervention in terms of engagement, practices, support, and timelines (see Appendix 2). In addition, ahead of any interviews or focus groups with teachers and senior leaders, the evaluation team sought consent from interviewees and briefed participants on the purpose of the research and how their data would be processed and used. They were assured that their personal identities would be kept confidential and no information that could be used to identify them would feature in the final outputs or shared with third parties without their consent. All interview recordings were transmitted and stored using the security principles underlined in the NIESR Data Security policy, including the secure transfer of data and use of password protection and encryption as appropriate during data storage. Members of the evaluation team who visited provider sites had Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance.

## Project team

The project was developed by AELP and MEI and led by Matthew Alvarez. AELP is a national membership organisation, representing the voice of independent providers, colleges, and higher education institutes that engage in government-funded skills training, English and maths, and employability programmes throughout England. MEI is an independent charity committed to improving maths education. It supports teaching and learning through different strands of activity including professional development opportunities and developing innovative resources.

The process evaluation team at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) was led by Johnny Runge, with support from Naomi Munro-Lott (formerly at NIESR) and Jonathan Buzzeo (formerly at NIESR).

## Methods

### Recruitment

The six provider organisations were selected among providers of vocational education that prepared 16- to 18-year-olds for their GCSE resits. Each of the six providers were discrete business units—settings did not share common management. The group of relevant students were those who obtained a D in their maths or English GCSE the previous year and who were taking the maths/English GCSE resit course for the first time in that academic year. The majority of these students would be 17 years old.

On this basis, AELP recruited provider organisations between May and August 2017 through a number of channels including using AELP publications, contacts, face-to-face events, and forums to raise awareness of the project. The contact details of any interested providers were stored alongside information they had shared as to why the project would fit for their setting.

Providers were then selected according to a number of considerations such as their understanding of how this would work within their organisation, whether they intended the programme to be implemented for the whole team or for selected practitioners who would then disseminate, the level of engagement including strong project leads, and, particularly, whether organisations seemed ready to engage at multiple levels, including SMT. Providers also had to demonstrate they had a cohort of students across the implementation period who would be involved for the duration of the programme. The latter meant that those that could only partially deliver the programme were not selected, for example, those that supported armed forces learning.

The participating providers all signed a Memorandum of Understanding at the start of the intervention. This provided guidelines for what was expected of providers throughout the intervention in terms of engagement, practices, support, and timelines (see Appendix 2).

### Data collection and analysis

The pilot evaluation included the following data collection methods:

- fieldwork visits to each of the six providers late in programme delivery, that is, after training day three during the period December 2017 to February 2018;<sup>3</sup> the visits included:
  - semi-structured interviews or small focus groups with Project Champions, English and maths teachers, senior leaders, vocational practitioners, and employment coordinators; and
  - lesson observation of at least one English or maths lesson in which contextualisation was used; and
- observation of all four training days across three providers.

All evaluation activities were carried out by NIESR with support from the delivery team at AELP and MEI.

Given the way the pilot intervention was designed, combined with the fact that it had not been trialled previously and that no pre-existing direct evidence base exists, it was deemed appropriate at this stage to use primarily qualitative research methods to assess the success of the intervention. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups explored the experiences and perspectives of participants to assess the extent to which the pilot intervention had led to changes in practices and to explore the perceived impacts, or potential impacts, of the intervention.

In addition, the interviews explored whether the intervention was seen as feasible and realistic to implement, and identified barriers to implementation and gathered views on how the intervention might be improved to inform potential future rollout. The observations of contextualised lessons and attendance at training days supplemented the interviews by increasing the evaluation team's understanding of what the intervention looked like in practice, and provided a naturalistic impression of how contextual factors affected implementation and what aspects of delivery are most salient. It also provided indication as to whether the intervention was implemented in a similar manner across providers.

---

<sup>3</sup> Due to illness among teaching staff, one fieldwork visit had to be cancelled and instead the evaluation team conducted phone interviews with all relevant staff groups, but did not conduct a lesson observation.

The three observed providers were chosen to give as broad a picture as possible, particularly in relation to provider size, type, and location. The observed providers were located across England and consisted of two large FE colleges and a small specialist provider (Providers 1, 2, and 3 in Table 4 below).

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. Data collected was analysed using a framework approach. This entailed coding the data into themes and issues. Most of these were predetermined, embodied in the research aims and the evaluation criteria, while others emerged from the fieldwork. The codes developed in the analysis of data formed the analytical framework of this research and were used to structure the findings of this report.

The study plan envisaged that the evaluation team would assess each evaluation criterion, based on the findings from each setting, alongside various dichotomous indicators such as engaged/not engaged (see Table 2). However, with agreement from the EEF after the fieldwork was completed, we decided to present more general findings with a focus on perceptions and barriers, on each of these indicators, rather than quantifying it.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the initial study plan proposed comparing retention rates for students undertaking GCSE resits in English and maths at each provider over the trial period with those from the previous year (2016/2017). This was not completed as we did not identify those students who had been exposed to contextualised learning in the classroom. The finding that many teachers and settings had not yet seen a significant increase in the use of contextualised learning meant this exercise would have had little meaning at the time the evaluation was completed.

## Timeline

Table 3 provides a breakdown of key pilot and evaluation activity across the intervention period.

Table 3: Timeline

Date	Activity
May–Aug 2017	School recruitment by AELP
July–Sept 2017	Attend first training day (NIESR)
Sept–Oct 2017	Attend second training day (NIESR)
Nov–Jan 2017	Attend third training day (NIESR)
Dec 2017–Feb 2018	Conduct site visits to all 6 providers (NIESR)
Jan–Feb 2018	Attend final training day (NIESR)
Early March 2018	Presentation of findings (NIESR and AELP)
Late March 2018	Decision taken not to progress to trial (EEF)
Apr–Aug 2018	Further analysis and reporting (NIESR)

<sup>4</sup> For more information, see the section on limitations in the conclusion

## Findings

### Participants

In total, six providers, located across England, participated in the pilot intervention. Five are general further education colleges—GFECs are where most post-16 GCSE education is delivered—and one of these has a vocational specialism. The last provider is a 16–19 free school offering study programmes to prepare students for further study or employment in a certain vocational specialism. The majority of providers are fairly large institutions with between 7,500–20,000 students, however, one provider is small with around 250 students. All six providers completed the programme.

Table 4 below provides an overview of the providers in the pilot according to provider type and size.

Table 4: List of providers in the pilot

Provider	Provider type	Appr. number of students	Appr. number of English students*	Appr. number of maths students*
Provider 1	16–19 Free School Vocational specialism	250	75	75
Provider 2	General FE College	20,000	1,300	1,500
Provider 3	General FE College	10,000	500	500
Provider 4	General FE College	10,000	500	600
Provider 5	General FE College Vocational specialism	7,500	300	300
Provider 6	General FE College	20,000	600	800

\* Number of English and maths students such as GCSE re-takes between the end of Key Stage 4 and the end of the 16–18 phase of education. Students who take both English and maths will be double-counted. Source: DfE school performance data.

### Evidence to support theory of change

This section seeks to establish whether the piloted intervention showed evidence of promise, and to what extent it can find evidence on the theory of change as outlined above. First, the section will assess whether teachers changed their working practices and whether there was an increase in the use of appropriate contextualised learning at participating sites that can be attributed to the pilot. Second, it will explore any perceived impacts of the intervention including on students' motivation and enjoyment and on outcomes such as retention and attainment. Third, the evaluation seeks to establish whether senior leaders in participating sites believed the programme to be a worthwhile investment.

These areas of interest were translated into three separate evaluation criteria, which will form the basis of the findings in this section. However, as already noted, it was decided not to quantify these in the reporting, but instead present common themes, with focus on perceptions and barriers. The questions in focus here are:

- **Change in working practices**—‘Do most sites (a minimum of 4 out of 6) perceive a change in working practices from engaging in the intervention—for example, can give two or more examples of E&M practitioners and employment coordinators working together, outside of training, to develop contextualised resources or cascade learning?’
- **Anticipated impacts**—‘Have most sites (a minimum of 4 out of 6) seen benefits from participating in the intervention, or expect to do so over the following 12 months?’
- **Worthwhile investment**—‘Do Senior Management Team (SMT) members from most sites (a minimum of 4 out of 6 settings) believe the intervention to be a worthwhile investment and would recommend it to other providers?’

## Change in working practices

The evaluation found some evidence of the pilot facilitating change in most providers in terms of bringing contextualisation on the agenda among teachers and senior leaders. In interviews, teachers and senior leaders often argued that it had been powerful to have a full day to sit down and create resources without the usual distractions. They often said this was only possible because the training day was seen as an important priority within the provider, which meant that senior leaders had ring-fenced this time:

*'One of the good things about this has just been that opportunity when you've been forced, if you like, to take a day out to work together, that's been good. We don't have that normally, we just haven't got time.'* – English Teacher, Provider 5.

*'It's obviously a very noble cause, there's a bit of money behind it. The college thinks it's a good idea which means those days are ring-fenced. So on those days you're not going to find people coming in and disturbing us because we've got a clear banner over the room about what we're doing during those days. So it means that those days are even more powerful.'* – Maths teacher, Provider 4.

For some teachers, this had given them an opportunity to think in more detail about their development of resources and lessons plans and getting new ideas and feedback during the process of sharing, reflecting, and working collaboratively. Typical remarks were:

*'We have had time now to confer, bounce off each other, so the ideas that one person has done, have come back to the table and told us and we've tried it, we've taken it away and tried it.'* – Maths teacher, Provider 6.

*'It has provided a focus in which they have had good professional dialogue, and they are enjoying thinking about it and sharing those things together.'* – Senior leader, Provider 4.

*'It's got us to think about what we're doing before we're planning our lesson... We're talking about what we're doing a lot more, so it's really improved our collaboration for resources, and people are taking ownership and tried to make a really brilliant lesson that they can share with the rest of the team.'* – Project Champion, Provider 4.

Based on senior leader and teacher interviews, the evaluation also found some evidence that there had been an increase in the use of contextualised learning in most providers, though this increase was limited in scope. Most teachers said they had implemented some techniques and lessons plans which they had developed during the training days, and often emphasised that these had been successful in terms of improving engagement among students. However, at the stage of the interviews (which typically occurred between the third and fourth training day), most teachers stressed that it was still early in implementation and that it still had not changed their teaching practices substantially. In some cases, there were examples of departments that had not wanted to make substantial changes to their approaches due to the success of their previous approaches, or because they had already created the term's lesson plans:

*'Our plan for learning had been written. Yours was complete, tried and tested, ours was a brand new one this year, because GCSE maths has changed this year for us, and we'd written it prior to this training. So yes, it was very difficult to then make huge change because of time constraints.'* – Maths teacher, Provider 3.

Others highlighted that they had not experienced an increase in the use of contextualised learning in their own teaching because they already considered this as part of their existing practice. However, these teachers often said that the programme had still helped them reflect on their approaches and sometimes refine their practices. Overall, teachers and senior leaders argued that it was still early in the implementation process and that they saw the programme as a longer-term project in terms of increasing the use of contextualised learning in the classroom.

*'It's going to take more than six months to make a big impact. It needs to be a longer stretch in order to see any success... if you look at the number of members of staff we have teaching English*

*and maths GCSE, for every single one of them to change all their programme of study is a big move. So it has to happen over time and I think the students wouldn't find it easy if you suddenly switch from "this is how we've taught now" to "this is how we're going to teach from now." ... It's got to evolve; it's got to move slowly into that.'* – Project Champion, Provider 5.

*'I don't think that we see this as a six-month project ... we're definitely long term ... It's a year action plan. It was always viewed as that.'* – Senior leader, Provider 1.

*'The challenge we've got is the short timescale, so whilst we're trying to come up with ideas and developments, it's very pushed to try and do it within the timescale.'* – Project Champion, Provider 3.

*'I think in my head this is contextualisation 1.0, and it will be a 2.0 next year where we will refine what we are doing, and expand what we are doing. And really drive it home with the vocational tutors.'* – English lead, Provider 2.

The evaluation found mixed evidence of training days facilitating an increase in the collaboration between English and maths teachers and vocational practitioners outside training. In some providers, the increased collaboration between these two staff groups was considered as an essential part of the programme and as one of the key success stories of the intervention. The project had, first of all, put collaboration on the agenda of senior leaders and staff members and had facilitated the introduction of a number of initiatives—such as helping the English and maths departments to identify the vocational practitioners who were interested in forming closer links.

Across the providers, there were a number of examples of current or future initiatives, such as the introduction of a buddy system, the sharing of lessons plans, English and maths teachers providing training to vocational staff in their areas, the inclusion of vocational staff members into the English and maths communities, and meetings, team teaching, and so on. On the other hand, in other providers the collaboration had barely featured as part of the programme, neither during nor outside training days. Sometimes, this was due to mixed or limited engagement among vocational practitioners. However, more fundamentally, during the pilot intervention many English and maths teachers came to the conclusion that students engaged more when teachers contextualised learning to real life rather than to vocational areas. This will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent section on barriers and formative findings, but for the purposes of this section, this conclusion made the collaboration with vocational practitioners of little importance.

### **Anticipated benefits**

All provider sites said it was too soon to assess whether the intervention had had any impact or could lead to a potential impact on student retention, attainment, and employment prospects. However, there was a broad consensus among participants that an emphasis on contextualised learning could potentially lead to a positive long-term impact, though this point was not always made with reference to the project specifically but the idea of contextualised learning in general. Some teachers cited examples of successful contextualised lessons, which had been developed during the training days, which had increased engagement during those lessons. During their visits, the evaluation team observed some of these lessons in both maths and English. These ranged from using vocational contextualisation—such as bricklaying and concrete for building students to teach area and volume—to real-life context, such as comparing discounts to teach percentages or comparing pizza prices to teach area and percentages. But in focus groups with teachers, this often led into a wider discussion about whether this potential increase in engagement would subsequently feed into an improvement in attainment. Two opinions were commonly expressed: some argued that improving retention and attendance would inevitably lead to improvements in attainment; others argued that the improvement in retention and attendance would often come at the expense of making the lessons less applicable to GCSE exams, thus leading either to no impact or even to a negative impact on attainment.

Some individual teachers and project champions said that there would be 'no impact' on the basis that contextualised learning was already an established part of their teaching practice. In addition, some project champions worried that the pilot intervention could even have a 'negative impact' due to the substantial time commitments devoted to the training days, which teachers may have been able to use more effectively. Some department leaders also noted that their department had already put in place different strategies in recent years which had proven successful and they saw the contextualisation pilot as an unwelcome distraction. This seemed to be related to issues with the recruitment of pilot

providers where sometimes only one subject department seemed to have been properly consulted about the decision to participate in the pilot intervention. This separate issue will be discussed in more detail in the section on barriers and formative findings.

### Worthwhile investment

Most senior leaders reported that they thought contextualisation was a powerful idea and a potentially effective instrument to improve teaching quality. This had also formed the basis of their initial decision to participate in the pilot intervention. However, going beyond contextualisation as an idea, senior leaders were less conclusive when speaking specifically about the pilot intervention and how it had been implemented. Most senior leaders were reluctant in recommending the current format of the training days or to consider the programme in its current form as a worthwhile investment. Specifically, it was a common theme that the intervention was very time-intensive, and that senior leaders would need much more overwhelming and consistent positive feedback from project champions and teaching staff to be able to commit four whole days. A typical comment was:

*'It's a lot to ask for four days. It's a very expensive thing to do, so we need it to be really useful and really high quality. One is the amount of commitment that is required in terms of the actual getting staff able to spend four days across a year, I mean it's almost impossible. Particularly given of how many students we have got to teach, so it's got to be worth it.'* – Senior leader, Provider 4.

Overall, senior leaders emphasised that the intervention required substantial changes to be rolled out, but that the intervention showed promise and had the potential to become a worthwhile investment.

### Feasibility

This section will assess whether the programme is likely to be practical and feasible for providers to engage in and implement. In particular, this section will describe withdrawal and participation rates among providers and teachers and explore to what extent participants believed the actions had been realistic and feasible to implement. In addition, the evaluation will describe the barriers to delivery experienced by providers and teachers.

The questions in focus here relating to the evaluation criteria for feasibility were:

- **Completion of programme**—'Does no more than one site withdraw from the pilot?'
- **Attendance at training days**—'Do the required members of the core team attend each training day, as outlined in the programme journey?'
- **Realistic and feasible**—'Do most sites (a minimum of four out of six) believe the actions recommended are realistic and feasible to implement? (This will be based on whether members of the core team believe they have had sufficient training, support, time, and engagement from other staff to implement the agreed actions.)'

Again, these criteria will only be quantified to the extent the data make this possible. Related to these criteria, this section will outline the **barriers to implementation** experienced by the providers.

### Completion of programme

The complete training programme (four days) was delivered in all provider organisations.

### Attendance at training days

While all six provider organisations completed the required training days, there was significant variation in the number and proportion of participating teachers across providers and within providers. While it was not made explicit at the outset exactly what the ideal teacher attendance would be for each training day, it was the understanding of the evaluation team that all maths and English teachers had been asked to participate, although obviously some dropout was to be expected due to teaching commitments, part-time contracts, and illness. That said, some providers clearly did not meet the requirements as they had fluctuating attendance, and, in some instances, large providers had only two teachers attending the training days. Furthermore, providers with low attendance had typically not developed a clear strategy to disseminate the material from the training sessions across the provider, though some had started to develop this towards the end of the intervention.



The variation in teacher attendance for training days across providers was substantial. In some (mainly smaller) providers, all English and maths teachers attended while in other (mainly larger) providers, only a subset of English and maths teachers attended. As mentioned, the evaluation team also observed substantial variation in teacher attendance for training days within providers, both between training days but also during training days where teachers in some cases dropped in and out or attended only some sessions. This was primarily related to teaching commitments, teaching cover, illness, part-time hours, lack of engagement, and difficulties associated with working across different sites. Generally, a number of providers had a large turnout for the first training day, but then experienced less engagement during the rest of the programme as other commitments were prioritised.

There were also significant variations in attendance across providers from other participants that were required to attend parts of the training, such as senior management members, vocational practitioners, and employment coordinators.

### **Realistic and feasible**

Project champions reported having enough support from within their own organisation to logistically arrange and complete the training days, though with variation in the achieved level of teacher and vocational practitioner attendance, which in some cases was attributed to a lack of engagement from the appropriate senior leaders. In terms of examining the broader evaluation criteria about whether providers believed the recommended actions had been realistic and feasible to implement, the evaluation team was not able to sufficiently assess this. There were a number of reasons for this. First, it was partly due to uncertainty in some providers and among some project champions about what exactly was expected of them during the intervention other than trying out different contextualisation techniques in their classroom.

Second, even though the interviews took place towards the end of the intervention period, providers univocally said they were still in the very early stages of implementation and that they saw it as a start of a longer journey. As such, they often said that they did not think it was realistic or feasible to have implemented the agreed actions by the end of the formal pilot intervention period, but often they did not see this as a problem and they were not aware that this was necessarily expected.

Third, providers had very different interpretations of what the agreed actions and outcomes were. This was partly due to an intervention design that supported and encouraged the development of different action plans in order to fit the individual college's specific circumstances and their existing contextualisation practices. In addition, the different interpretations were caused by the differences in implementation, such as the variation in the proportion of participating teachers, as well as the impact from different college sizes and characteristics.

Other findings related to this evaluation criteria will be covered mainly in the subsequent sections on barriers and formative findings.

### **Barriers**

A number of barriers to implementation were identified during fieldwork visits in interviews with teachers, project champions, and senior leaders. The section below will describe the main barriers. A subsequent section in the conclusion on formative findings will outline how these and other issues may potentially be addressed.

The main barrier to successful implementation was the length of the intervention and of individual training days. Investing four full days was considered a substantial time commitment, leading to timetabling and attendance issues, particularly due to the providers being reluctant to release staff and provide cover. Senior leaders emphasised that they would need to see significant and proven impact to be able to recommend other providers to make this investment and to potentially make this commitment themselves again.

There was a general feeling among many teachers that contextualised learning was better suited to teaching functional skills. Teachers and project champions who made this argument acknowledged that the contextualisation approach should, in theory, benefit GCSE as well but highlighted a number of barriers they had encountered which were specific to GCSE. In particular, teachers emphasised that, unlike for functional skills, the GCSE exam specification and papers were not contextualised, and ultimately their responsibility as teachers was to give their students the best possible opportunity to achieve the highest possible results in those exams. While teachers appreciated that contextualised

learning may lead to improvements in pupil retention and enjoyment, some teachers were not convinced that this would feed into an improvement in attainment as there was a real concern about students' ability to transfer contextualised knowledge to a non-contextualised exam setting:

*'It might help keeping them in the classroom, but if they can't relate, if they can't make the transfer from what we've taught them about their vocation to what the examiner is going to ask them about, alright, we've kept them in the classroom all year but then he still failed the exam, because we're not giving them the exam style questions, we're giving them their contextualised questions.'* – Maths Teacher, Provider 6.

*'For GCSE, contextualisation may work as a route to get them engaged initially, but as soon as you get them to do exam questions, or exam-style questions, that context has then gone.'* – English teacher, Provider 3.

*'Students quite often will get lost in the context ... That's compounded in the GCSE where, at the end of the day, the end-of-topic assessments that we give them, or the formative assessments we give them, are all based on past exam papers where it won't say, "Mary is building a patio for her garden, she needs to work out how many slabs she needs"; it will say, "What is the area of this rectangle?"'* – Maths teacher, Provider 3.

Sometimes teachers said students made these connections themselves, which led to reduced motivation:

*'They just want to pass the exam, and the exam is not contextualised, so they're just like, why are we doing it?'* – Teacher, Provider 3.

The aim of the intervention was to use contextualisation to initially engage students before moving on the exam preparation and non-contextualised teaching. However, teachers often emphasised that they faced tight time constraints in each GCSE lesson to cover the entire GCSE syllabus, and therefore had to prioritise their time carefully. A typical comment was:

*'In GCSE, there are set things we have to deliver in each lesson, we don't have much time to do it. So while we do need to be creative with our teaching methodologies, there isn't a great deal of room, no flexibility.'* – Maths teacher, Provider 3.

Generally, some teachers recommended that the intervention should have been based more on the GCSE syllabus, with focus on where contextualisation could contribute to teaching the syllabus:

*'Our starting point and our finishing point should always be, "What do we need them to learn for when they walk into that exam?"'* – English lead, Provider 2.

Another barrier that was frequently expressed by teachers was the finding that real-life contextualisation often engaged students more than vocational contextualisation. The pilot intervention was designed specifically with vocational contextualisation in mind, and, as such, the role of vocational practitioners and employment coordinators during training days was highlighted in the project design. However, the trainers showed flexibility when teachers reported that real-life contextualisation had worked better, and in line with the nature of training days, trainers encouraged them to use the most appropriate type of contextualisation and emphasised that only some topics lend themselves to vocational contextualisation. Teachers reported, in particular, that students were often not interested in their vocational area, and that they had only chosen it because it was mandatory. Typical comments were:

*'They just go to college to go to college and they're not necessarily that interested in the subjects that they do... So you've got to tap into what that age group is really passionate about. And of course big things are phones, friendships, appearance, sport. So that's where the contextualisation, I think, is really powerful and that's where you bring people out.'* – Maths teacher, Provider 4.

*'Students don't actually want to be on their vocational subject... Under 18, they have to attend education, so they have to be here to do something ... So drilling more health and social care issues into them, they've had enough of their vocational programme. Using things that are in the media, or fun things for teenagers, is far more effective than drilling more and more vocational stuff.'* – Teacher, Provider 3.

*'I've tended to use more of the world around us ... because they have got things to say about that, they have got an opinion on it—and so it does spark an element of engagement.'* – English teacher, Provider 2.

This was also noted by evaluators when observing contextualised lessons. One example was teaching trigonometry to public service students by contextualising to navigation officers in the Navy and RAF, which many of the students didn't engage with. The difficulty was further compounded by the existence of mixed-vocational classes. Furthermore, teachers often said that contextualising to everyday life had the substantial advantage that it was more time-efficient for teachers as it required less preparation and less expertise, and they could more easily replicate lessons plans from year to year, and it also allowed them to be more adaptable and improvising during lessons. Typical remarks were:

*'We can't be masters of every vocational area, it's impossible.'* – Maths Teacher, Provider 6.

*'I think sometimes you can use it a bit more mechanically rather than being something that you planned, you can bring something in that's, because something's come up, they've mentioned something and then you can use that to go back to a point or connect up an idea.'* – Maths Teacher, Provider 6.

*'We've just realised that the things that are to do with the everyday life have worked better. There's also the fact that you can reuse that resource with multiple vocational areas.'* – Project Champion, Provider 4.

*'If we can just contextualise it in a more general sense for that age group, I think then we don't have to keep inventing the wheel every time we design a lesson.'* – Maths teacher, Provider 4.

*'I think the real life stuff has potential because we are adults, we have a life, so we understand what's going on there, whereas with the various different vocational areas, there's no way that we could understand everything, and we run the risk then of getting it wrong.'* – Teacher, Provider 3.

The pilot evaluation suggested that English teachers may have a larger tendency to prefer real life contextualisation where maths teachers more often can see the value of vocational contextualisation, particular in certain topics and for certain vocational areas. However, this finding should be considered in light of the small sample sizes.

Finally, many barriers stemmed directly from the difficulties and challenges experienced by the further education sector such as funding, behaviour, available rooms, facilities and equipment, pupil attendance and retention, teaching quality, and qualifications. Furthermore, many of the further education providers who participated in this trial typically had many different sites and campuses, which in some cases complicated the collaboration, sharing, and dissemination between different staff groups and departments as well as the organisation of training days.

## Readiness for trial

This section will assess whether the programme is ready to be trialled at a larger scale, that is, assess the extent to which the training and resources make up a standard intervention which is replicable and scalable to a wider context beyond the pilot stage. In particular, this section will describe to what extent the training days contained the same identifiable components across the training providers, and to what extent participants believed the training days and resources require structural changes to achieve the intended outcomes.

Two evaluation criteria were examined to assess the readiness of the trial. The questions relating to these were:

- **Were the training days similar across providers?**—'Did the training days contain the same identifiable components—for example, sessions and activities—when delivered across different sites in line with the programme journey developed by AELP?'
- **Structural changes**—'Do most sites (a minimum of 4 out of 6) believe the training days and resources do not require any structural changes in order to achieve the intended outcomes?' (For example, that attendees felt that the content and/or length of the training was appropriate and helpful in assisting them to make fuller and better use of contextualisation within their organisation.)

### **Were the training days similar across providers?**

This was assessed by observing all four training days at three out of the six providers, and the evaluation team questioned participants across all providers about the content of the training days to assess whether they had contained identifiable sessions and activities.

Broadly, the evaluation team concluded that the training days seemed to contain the same identifiable components as outlined in the AELP programme journey (Appendix 1)—explained earlier in this report in the intervention description. The observations and interviews did find some slight adaptations to fit the requirements of the specific provider, partly due to the variation in attendance, but also as a result of the different action plans and the different past practices. This was benchmarked on Day 1, and, as such, the slight adaptations resulting from this should not be considered as deviations from the programme specifications. Indeed, although some individual departments within providers complained that trainers had not properly taken into account their past practices, most providers seemed to appreciate that trainers had allowed the provider to work within their context and background. A typical comment was:

*'The trainers haven't taken away control, they've allowed us, as supposed experts in our field, to see what we've got ... see how we can develop and how we can move on and improve things, which was always going to be the best way forward.'* – Project Champion, Provider 5.

In interviews, it was a common theme that participating teachers and project champions criticised what they perceived as a lack of structure during parts of the training—that there were too many repetitive abstract discussions about the use of contextualisation. This observation was also made in most providers during the evaluation team's training day visits though it seemed to vary somewhat in accordance with the style and personality of the individual trainers. It should be said that the abstract discussions about the use of contextualisation was part of the pilot design in the programme journey as the programme intended to equip teachers with an in-depth understanding of contextualised learning that would enable them to embed it into all future planning and not just specific topics covered during the training day.

Finally, the specifications outlined that support would be given through a series of remote support sessions. Project champions were encouraged to contact the facilitators on an ad hoc basis to receive support with the development of resources and the action plan, or other aspects of the programme including practical arrangements around training days. In addition, there was a pre-arranged day between the project team and the facilitator/subject leads. The delivery team said that a majority of the pilot providers used these support channels. During our visits, all project champions emphasised that there were open lines of communication, and some had indeed used these fairly intensively and in these instances it was clear that trainers were very engaged and very invested in the programme. However, other providers had made little use of this opportunity but emphasised that this had been their decision, primarily due to time constraints or not needing any support.

In addition, the programme specification outlined that both English and maths teachers would receive a contextualisation toolkit with information about how to make use of contextualisation in their teaching. This only seemed to be the case for maths teachers who were given access to the MEI contextualisation toolkit. Access to a Dropbox folder of shared resources was provided towards the end of the pilot evaluation, and after the evaluation team visited providers, so no data is available on teachers' perception of the quality and usefulness of the resources.

### **Are structural changes needed?**

All providers believed, to varying degrees, that the training days and resources require changes. These are outlined in the following section on formative findings.

## Conclusion

### Key Conclusions

1. Overall, the increase in the use of contextualised learning in the classroom was limited and it was therefore difficult for teachers to assess whether the intervention had an impact on outcomes like retention and attainment.
2. The intervention helped to raise the profile of contextualisation among teachers and senior leaders. Further education teachers and senior leaders generally supported the idea of using contextualised learning to improve pupil motivation and believed in the potential of this type of intervention.
3. Teachers reported concerns about the challenge of applying contextualised knowledge to a non-contextualised GCSE exam. They also reported students' tendency to respond better to real-life, rather than vocational, contextualisation due to a lack of interest in their vocational area.
4. The intervention required teachers to attend four full-day training sessions. This was considered to be a significant investment, and may have been more attractive for settings if the training days had been more time-effective and were shown to have proven impact.
5. If the intervention is taken forward for wider rollout, it needs significant changes. These could include the provision of additional resources, changes to the structure of sessions, and more clarity about the expectations of participating staff.

## Formative findings

The evaluation identified a number of formative findings that might inform the design of a future pilot or a larger rollout of the intervention. Some are related to the very essence of the intervention while other findings are related to smaller areas of potential improvement.

First, teachers and senior leaders had originally expected—and repeatedly requested during the intervention—to be supplied with a bank of existing contextualisation resources and to be able to share resources between pilot providers. The latter was provided via a Dropbox folder in the latter stages of the intervention, but this only happened after all interviews had been completed with programme participants—or at least interviewed teachers and project champions were not aware of this initiative at the time of their interviews. The intervention deliberately did not provide such resources as part of the intervention as the intention was not to spoon-feed teachers but, instead, give ideas about how to make use of contextualisation and help them develop their own ability to create their own resources. The MEI maths toolkit, which was provided at the outset, was based on the same principle and was described as an **'ideas generator'** by some teachers.

However, participants argued that, while they enjoyed developing resources, it was time-consuming and it would be more time-effective to have an existing bank of resources including lesson plans, videos, and mock examples, and then make the necessary tweaks and develop their own resources based on this. In teachers' minds, this theme was closely related to the criticism that the training often lacked structure and revolved around abstract discussions about teaching practices rather than a more hands-on approach. Typical comments were:

'I was expecting perhaps more materials for us to actually look at and evaluate rather than us doing more of the development. I was hoping we would have been given more stuff—"here's an approach, here's some materials, can you try it"—and evaluate whether it's viable.' – Project Champion, Provider 3.

*'I did like the idea of being given some time to be creative and think about resources, because teachers don't have enough of that. But what I would have preferred from a training day perspective is to actually be trained. If I'm being honest I wanted, right there's a format to the day, and here are a load of contextual resources, a walk-through of lessons. So by the next time we see you we want you to have tried this, this, this and this. And then we'll get some feedback on the impact of that, and how that's gone.'* – English teacher, Provider 2.

*'If we'd had a huge bank of resources, or a mock-up of a lesson, or a micro teacher or something like that to show this is a really good example of contextualisation. Take it away, use it, and see how you get on with your learners. Did you have to tweak it, did you have to change anything? How could we develop this? But there weren't really any ideas forthcoming from the beginning. So I think it was a missed opportunity really.'* – English lead, Provider 2.

Another issue raised by participants—described in the previous section on barriers to implementation—concerned the length of the intervention and of individual training days: participants frequently suggested shortening training days to half days or even two-hour sessions. While some recommended a reduction in the number of training days, more often, participants explained that while four days was a substantial time commitment, it could, potentially, be appropriate, but only if this time was used more effectively.

In particular, it was suggested to shorten the explanation of the project aims and agenda at Day 1, or, alternatively, disseminate the information in another way, either by giving the information beforehand in written form or video format, or during an event for Project Champions. It was also unclear to the evaluation team what the purpose of Day 4 would be in a future rollout as the final training day in the pilot intervention mostly focused on evaluation and formative findings for future rollout. Regarding training on developing resources, participants often said effectiveness could be improved by making it more structured, more hands-on, and by having a bank of contextualisation resources as the starting point. Finally, participants generally considered that embedding contextualised learning into teaching practices was a much longer process than the current format allowed, and some suggested that training days might usefully be spread across a longer time period.

Another formative finding is that a subsequent intervention should have a much clearer understanding at the outset of the attendance requirements in each college. The evaluation identified substantial variation in teacher attendance between providers, and also within providers across the four training days, and even during each training day as teachers sometimes had teaching and other commitments during parts of the day. Some smaller colleges had their entire English and Maths teaching staff participating in the intervention and attending all training days. In other colleges, it was a very small fraction of English and Maths teachers who participated in the intervention. In these latter cases, it was still unclear— at the time of the evaluation interviews— whether, and how, this training would be effectively disseminated across the provider. A future rollout would need to consider these issues, alongside how this differs for different providers, particularly in relation to the size of the providers.

Also, from the outset, the role of vocational practitioners needs to be clarified, particularly since one of the evaluation findings was that real-life contextualisation often engaged students better than vocational contextualisation. If any subsequent intervention chose not to focus specifically on vocational contextualisation, the role of vocational practitioners could be marginal, if not redundant. Here, the involvement of vocational practitioners was mixed: in some providers it was highlighted as one of the main positive experiences, whereas in others, vocational practitioners hardly featured during, or outside, training days. Providers that were successful in engaging vocational practitioners often recommended that it should be a two-way project: that vocational practitioners should participate on an equal footing in training days and then be asked to embed English and maths in their lessons. However, this has not been piloted systematically and this only happened spontaneously in some providers where it was part of their developed action plan. In other pilot providers, this would likely have faced substantial barriers, particular in relation to the engagement of vocational practitioners. Similarly, the role of employment coordinators was not always clear, and in some instances providers could not identify one.

There should be a stronger focus on understanding providers' previous approaches to contextualisation, both in English and maths. The pilot providers included those that had been recruited on the basis of interest from one subject department (usually maths) but had failed to ensure that there was sufficient support from the other department's leaders and teachers. In some cases, this substantially affected the commitment of the department lead and the motivation of the teachers. In relation to this, the first training day should establish the individual departments' previous and current approaches to contextualisation. This was one of the stated aims of the first training day and was achieved in some providers and departments, but seemingly not in others, suggesting that there should be a stronger or more systematic focus on this.

The evaluation showed mixed support from senior leaders. This highlighted the essential nature of senior leader support to enable project champion to facilitate and organise across departments and engage vocational practitioners and employment coordinators. The lack of support in some providers was particularly problematic for more junior project champions, or for those who only had close relations with the teachers from their own department.

The pilot evaluation suggests that any future rollout should take into consideration the substantial differences in the dynamics of implementation between smaller and bigger providers, as well as between general and specialist providers.

This finding is highly tentative due to the small sample size. The intervention was only piloted among six providers, divided into four large further education colleges and two smaller providers with focus on a specific vocational area. The intervention seemed to work better in the smaller, vocation-specific providers where there was a natural focus on one vocational area and a smaller teaching staff to coordinate between. The mixed-vocational classes in general providers was cited as a significant barrier to creating suitable vocationally contextualised learning resources; large providers also encountered logistical problems related to the larger teaching staff being dispersed across multiple sites leading to low attendance at training days.

## Interpretation

The evaluation found some evidence to support the theory of change, particularly in relation to putting contextualisation on the agenda among teachers and senior leaders, as well as fostering relationships between English and maths teachers and vocational practitioners. However, by the end of the pilot evaluation the increase in contextualised learning was relatively limited and it was difficult for teachers to perceive any impact (whether actual or potential) on student outcomes such as retention and attainment. Providers, however, typically did not necessarily consider this to be a problem as the programme was seen as a longer-term journey for which the training days had provided a foundation. There was strong support for the general idea of using contextualisation in English and maths, and a belief in the potential of this type of intervention, though it was often emphasised that changes were required to realise this potential.

The evaluation strongly identified the need to make changes to the programme for it to be feasible for evaluation in a trial. The evaluation identified a number of key barriers and formative findings. First, the time commitment required to deliver this intervention is substantial (four full training days), and participants discussed how the intervention could be made more time-effective. Suggestions included shortening the length of sessions or reducing the number of training days, providing explanations of the project aims and agenda prior to the first training session, and having a bank of existing contextualisation resources to make the development of resources more time-effective.

Second, the pilot evaluation revealed mixed experiences and opinions between teachers about students' ability to apply their contextualised knowledge to the non-contextualised GCSE exam papers. Teachers pointed to the substantial time constraints for each GCSE lesson to cover the syllabus, and some argued that their priority had to be to prepare students for the (non-contextualised) GCSE exam. Third, teachers often experienced that students were more engaged when teachers contextualised to their everyday life due to a lack of interest in their vocational area. This, in turn, led to questions about the importance of vocational practitioners whose role needs to be more clearly defined in any subsequent interventions. Fourth, the attendance of teachers at training days varied substantially across providers both in terms of numbers and proportions, as well as within providers as teachers dropped in and out during, and between, training days. The intervention would benefit from defining a clearer expectation of attendance requirements, and for clearer guidance on how to disseminate the training to non-attendees.

## Limitations

Any conclusions and formative findings should be considered in light of the small sample size in the pilot project (six providers). The evaluation design constructed different evaluation criteria around the key themes of the theory of change, feasibility, and readiness for trial, and initially aimed to quantify how many providers had achieved each evaluation criteria. However, after the completion of the qualitative fieldwork, the evaluation team chose only to provide indicative estimates of most of these and instead provide a thorough qualitative account of any findings related to the evaluation criteria and the key themes. This decision was taken due to a number of factors which made it difficult to make a binary distinction as to whether individual providers had achieved the specific criteria.

Some of the difficulty arose from the variation in practices and implementation *across* providers and *within* providers due to different experiences between English and maths departments. For example, there was variation in attendance of English and maths teachers, vocational practitioners, and employment coordinators, variation in the willingness to change existing practices, variation in the prominence and content of action plans, variation in the involvement of senior leaders and the knowledge of what the programme entailed, there were also different previous approaches to contextualisation, and variations in perceptions of the value of the intervention between English and maths teachers.

Furthermore, as already discussed, many providers did not consider the end of the training days to mark the end of the project. When the evaluation team finished its data collection in February 2018, providers still considered the intervention to be in its early stages of implementation because they considered the embedding of contextualisation practices as a longer-term journey for the provider as well as for individual departments and teachers. As such, it was hard to assess even potential impact at the time of data collection and any subsequent evaluation methodology should reflect this.

## Future research and publications

The evaluation team suggests that revisions are done to the project design before any further rollouts and evaluations. The revisions should include considerations as to how to address the formative findings outlined in this report, such as supplying a bank of existing contextualisation resources at the outset, making the training days more time-effective, making it clearer what the role and purpose of vocational practitioners and employment coordinators are, securing buy-in from both the English and maths departments prior to rollout as well as strong support from senior leaders during implementation, and adopt strategies to address the different dynamics in different type of providers.

Furthermore, this pilot evaluation highlights a number of research questions and challenges which could be explored further in future research. Some of these relate to the use of contextualisation for GCSE resits in further education providers, such as students' tendency to respond better to real-life contextualisation due to a lack of interest in their vocational area, the difficulty of using vocational contextualisation in mixed-vocational classes, and the concern about students' ability to transfer contextualised knowledge to a non-contextualised GCSE exam.

In addition, the evaluation demonstrated some practical challenges in rolling out education interventions in the vocational education sector, such as a lack of resources and planning time, the time constraints for each GCSE lesson to cover the syllabus, and the lack of relationships between different staff groups such as between vocational practitioners and English/maths teachers.



## References

The Education and Training Foundation (2014) 'Effective Practices in Post-16 Vocational Maths' (December 2014):  
<http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Effective-Practices-in-Post-16-Vocational-Maths-v4-0.pdf>

Higton, J., Archer, R., Dalby, D., Robinson, S., Birkin, G., Stutz, A., Smith, R. and Duckworth, V. (2017) 'Effective practice in the delivery and teaching of English and Mathematics to 16-18 year olds', Department for Education (November 2017):

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/662470/English\\_and\\_Mathematics\\_to\\_16-18\\_year\\_olds.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662470/English_and_Mathematics_to_16-18_year_olds.pdf)

Maughan, S., Smith, J., Mitchell, T., Horrocks, N. and Taylor, A., (2016) 'Improving Level 2 English and maths outcomes for 16 to 18 year olds, Literature review', Education Endowment Foundation, July 2016:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/evidence-reviews/post-16/>

## **Appendix 1: AELP/MEI outline of training days**

### **Improving GCSE resit outcomes through expanding contextualisation within Post-16 English and maths**

#### **Outline of content of face-to-face days**

For this project, we have designed a programme of support for organisations taking part in the intervention group. The sessions will be facilitated by AELP/MEI professional development leaders who will come from our pool of expert associates. Several of these took part in the earlier project on contextualisation in English and maths for DfE.

Below we have outlined how we currently envisage the content being divided between the four days; however, we may adjust this when we plan the days in more detail as part of the programme development phase.

#### **Day 1 (audience: leadership, management and E&M practitioners)**

##### **Aims**

The aim of the first visit is to benchmark the nature of the provider's use of contextualised resources and delivery against a simple scale and to set a plan in place that they will agree to, that will result in them using contextualised resources for maths and English teaching and embracing the associated pedagogy. It will introduce the practitioners to the benefits of contextualisation and work through some resources they might use with students, along with suggestions for where to find more.

##### **Overview**

This will ideally be attended by representatives from across the organisation, although we will be flexible to the provider's requirements and their organisational structure. The leadership and management team may leave the session after the action plan has been agreed.

##### **Introduction**

An exchange of information about:

- The project, AELP and MEI, EEF, LSE, etc.
- The provider, practitioners, and their learners
- The aims of the programme and expectations of participants

##### **Introduction to the programme**

How they can better help learners to see the relevance of English and maths to themselves as individuals, and especially in work and career terms:

- Use of contextualisation in E&M lessons (refer to the toolkits)
- E&M practitioners working with vocational practitioners
- Showing relevance of E&M in employment and career planning

##### **Diagnosis specific to provider/site**

- Issues, e.g. learner motivation/confidence, attendance at English/Maths lessons
- Current approach to contextualisation of GCSEs, existing contact between English and maths (E&M) specialists and vocational specialists
- Learner engagement - What's going well? What could be improved?

- Mechanisms for ensuring the approach is adopted effectively across the whole provider/site,
- Defining the role of practitioner champion.

### **Supporting structures**

Review case studies and video clips which show approaches to contextualisation, and ways in which some providers have set up organisational structures to encourage collaboration between departments, to facilitate sharing of expertise and resources. Discuss participants' own experiences, potential barriers, and how they might be overcome.

### **Develop and agree an action plan with all 3 staff levels**

### **Sources of Inspiration**

Discussions and activities about how to get ideas for contextualisation

- What sources do participants currently use? What could they use?
- Existing resources (show some examples of good resources)
- The context grids
- Other useful sources
- Collaborating with vocational practitioners and local employers.
- Gathering ideas from learners' work, interests, and other life experiences.

### **To do for next session**

Practitioners will be encouraged to continue to look at the contextualisation toolkit online in advance of Day 2. They will be asked to identify and try at least two contextualised resources with their learners and come to day 2 ready to feedback. They will also be briefed about Day 2's main focus of starting to develop their own contextualised activity and the resources to support it. They will be expected to gather and prepare ideas for the activity and accompanying resources. In doing so, they will need to consider the needs of the groups of learners they intend to use it with; the English/maths to be covered; the context to be used; and the types of resources to be developed. They will be encouraged to begin to develop their ideas through discussions with colleagues, including vocational practitioners in advance of the first face to face session, although ideas will be built on during days 2 and 3.

**Follow-up support** will be provided between Day 1 and Day 2 to check that agreed actions have begun. This support will be via telephone and/or online seminars

## **Day 2 (audience: E&M Practitioners only)**

### **Aims**

The aim of day 2 will be for the practitioners to reflect their own experiences of contextualisation. They will also explore what makes a good contextualised resource (and what makes an ineffective/less effective one) and when it is not appropriate to contextualise. They will start work on the development of their own contextualised resources.

### **Overview**

In most cases, this day will include all staff. They will gather together initially and (whenever appropriate) then split into English and maths practitioners, so they can focus on specific curriculum areas. Where they are split into separate subject groups, the professional development leaders will bring them together again at the end of the day.

Where practical this day will include one or two visits to lessons with practitioners, scheduled in advance. The aim of these visits will be to help the professional development leaders to gain a better understanding of the site environment and the learners.

## Reflections on Day 1

Participants reflect on day 1 and the activities they were asked to undertake in preparation for day 2. They will discuss their experiences to date of using contextualisation and examples of contextualised teaching and learning they have already used successfully themselves.

## Exploring ideas about contextualisation

Discussion and activities covering:

- How does contextualising English and maths support learning?
- What are the limitations of contextualisation?
- What makes a good contextualised resource?
- What are the pros and cons of different types of contextualised resources?
- Some approaches to developing activities and resources.
- A brief review of the references to relevant sections of the contextualisation toolkit.

## Participants' activity ideas

Participants discuss their ideas with the rest of the group for the activities and associated resources that they hope to develop. They explain why they have made their decisions and how they expect their decisions will help to improve outcomes for their learners.

## Resources development activity (main part of the day)

Participants start work on the development of their resources, partnered with others for peer support and guided and encouraged by the professional development leaders. They are encouraged to refer to the contextualisation toolkits.

## End-of-day plenary review

Participants give a brief update on their progress in the development tasks – what has gone well and any difficulties they are experiencing? The professional development leaders facilitates the exchange of ideas and consideration of issues from different perspectives.

## To do for next session

Practitioners are asked to continue to gather ideas and develop their contextualised resources/activities, and to bring them to day 3.

## Review progress on action plan with management

**Follow-up support** will be provided between Day 2 and Day 3 to ensure that agreed actions have begun. This support will be via telephone and/or online seminars. We will also review progress on the overall project action plan with management (if they are not present on Day 2), by phone or e-mail.

## Day 3 (audience: E&M Practitioners, Employment Coordinators, etc.)

### Aims

The aim of day 3 will be for the practitioners to progress the development of their resources, where possible completing them by the end of the day. It will also explore how working with vocational practitioners and employment coordinators can further help learners to understand the relevance of E&M to their futures, as well as providing a further inspiration for contextualisation and exploration of when contextualisation is not appropriate.

### Overview

This third day will also include any staff who have an employer-facing role, so that they can fully understand how the work being done relates to their interactions with employers, and adjust their own approaches accordingly, as necessary. It will also suggest ways that employers can support the contextual teaching practices.

In most cases, this day will include all E&M practitioners. They will gather together initially and then split into English and maths practitioners, so they can focus on specific curriculum areas. Then the professional development leaders will bring them together again after the resources development activity.

### **Reflections on Day 2**

Recap on Day 2 and a discussion about any further thoughts participants may have had in between, on what was covered then and what has occurred since.

### **Progress on resources development**

Each practitioner gives a 5-10 minute presentation on their activity/resources. Other members of the group contribute ideas that may help with further development. Facilitated discussion will be led on emerging themes and further suggestions/ideas.

### **Resources development activity**

Participants continue to work on the development of their resources, supported and encouraged by each other and AELP/MEI professional development leader(s). At the end, they assess what further work is required outside this day to complete their resources. Brief plenary in which any difficulties are discussed and ideas exchanged.

### **Working with vocational practitioners**

Discussion (if this has not already emerged clearly) about ways in which E&M practitioners can collaborate with vocational practitioners to

- a) Embed E&M in vocational learning
- b) Bring examples of vocational contexts into E&M

### **Integrating Work Experience and English/Maths (Employment coordinator to attend)**

Cover some of the themes and ideas in <http://mei.org.uk/study-programme> -- with appropriate parallels for English. It will look particularly at:

- Getting employers on board
- Practical suggestions for encouraging learners and employers to enhance learners' English and maths skills during work experience placements.
- Contextualisation using examples from the workplace.

### **Beyond just “contextualisation all the time”**

Consider what can't or shouldn't be contextualised, and how to approach such things – as staff, and with learners. Explore current approaches, and give examples, and rationales.

### **Plenary Review**

Practitioners reflect on what they have learned, the challenges they have encountered, and ways in which they might overcome them.

### **To do for next session**

The professional development leader encourages the participants to continue to develop further contextualised activities/resources over the coming weeks, including to:

- Carry out further trials with learners and gather learner feedback.
- Share resources with their colleagues for feedback.
- Share resources with other programme participants inside and outside their organisation for feedback.

## **Review progress on action plan with management**

## **Day 4 (audience: E&M Practitioners, Employment Coordinators, etc.)**

### **Aim**

Practitioners reflect on trialling their resources with learners. The focus then moves on to preparation for GCSE exams. As the day draws to a close, the importance and means of sustaining the approach are emphasised.

### **Overview**

In most cases, this day will include all E&M practitioners. They will gather together initially and then split into English and maths practitioners, so they can focus on specific curriculum areas. Then the facilitators will bring them together again after the revision planning activity.

### **Reflections on Day 3**

- Recap on Day 3
- Practitioners reflect on the experience of using their resources with their learners and the feedback they received. What went well? What would they do differently in future?
- Discussion on progress in collaborating with vocational practitioners (embedding and contextualisation)
- Discussion on integrating work experience with English and Maths learning in the classroom (involving Employment Coordinators, etc.)
- Any further thoughts participants may have had on what was covered in Day 3.

### **Moving on**

Focus on moving away from contextualisation to exam preparation. Explore how the organisation/E&M teams/attendees approach this already. Cover content the toolkit guides on strategies for preparing learners for examinations.

### **Revision plan activity**

Practitioners develop a revision plan for their learners which uses some contextualised activities (familiar and unfamiliar) and some non-contextualised activities. Plenary discussion.

### **Sustainability**

Reminder of the sources of support available – and further brainstorming on these. Is there anything else that needs to happen to sustain the approach?

### **What next**

What follow-up they can expect from the programme, e.g. contact from EEF, regarding surveys/interviews on learner reactions and apparent impact (in both low-level short-term ways like attendance/punctuality, attention, engagement/contribution, work-rate, etc. and expected potential increases in achievement)

### **Close**

Review of key points from the course. Encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and to note actions on which they intend to follow up.

**Management review**

A meeting with leadership/management to update them on the programme as a whole and advise them of likely follow-up activity.

## Appendix 2: Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) example



### MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU)

- (1) Association of Employment and Learning Providers ("AELP") whose registered office is at 2nd Floor, 9 Apex Court, Bradley Stoke, Bristol, BS32 4JT
- (2)

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** The Pilot phase of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) funded project - Improving GCSE resit outcomes through expanding contextualisation within Post-16 English and maths

#### GENERAL TERMS FOR THE CO-OPERATION:

The co-operation will be conducted in a spirit of fairness and goodwill and the parties agree that they will use their reasonable efforts to follow the expectations outlined in this memorandum.

The parties accept that this MOU can only serve as a framework and that its implementation will be resolved through discussion and joint agreement between representatives of AELP and

#### PURPOSE:

The purpose of this MOU is for both parties to:

- Agree to the commitment required to fully engage and participate in this project.
- Work together to explore the enhanced use of contextualisation of English and maths within a vocational setting to support Post 16 learners within their GCSE resit outcomes.
- Actively participate in the 4 days of face-to-face (F2F) workshops and up to 15 hours of virtual support to enable to develop contextualised English and maths into vocational delivery to Post 16 learners.
- Actively participate and support the agreed evaluation and measurement of the impact of this project.

#### DURATION:

This pilot project will commence in June 2017 and run through to February 2018. If both parties agree then may be asked to provide some mentoring and content support of the potential full implementation that commences in March 2018.

The delivery of the CPD programme will run from July 2017 to January 2018. The content will follow this approximate schedule:



- Day 1 (F2F) – July/September 2017
- Day 2 (F2F) – September/October 2017
- Day 3 (F2F) – November 2017
- Day 4 (F2F) – January 2018

Our facilitators will also provide approximately 15 hours of virtual support between Day 2 and Day 4.

#### **OBLIGATIONS:**

##### **AELP Shall:**

- Design a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) course that will consist of four (4) separate days of face to face workshops and up to 15 hours of virtual support throughout the delivery programme.
- Develop a framework toolkit to enable them to be used as the basis for the practitioners' initial and/or improved engagement with contextualised resources.
- Provide an English and maths facilitator for both face to face and virtual engagements with throughout the CPD delivery phase of the project

##### **Shall:**

- Agree with AELP on the dates and times for the face-to-face and virtual support to take place within the timeline of the delivery phase of the project
- Ensure that a representative of senior management participates and their agreement is secured in writing to the action plan agreed on Day 1 (F2F) of the programme
- Agree a Project Champion within to facilitate the action plan requirements that has support from Senior Leaders and management and full engagement with practitioners across the organisation.
- Enable the Project Champion to initiate and implement the action plan, agreed within the Day 1 workshop, and its content through the life of the project across the whole organisation.
- Work with the AELP facilitators to develop their own contextualised activities and resources to engage with their Post 16 learners to support English and maths delivery within a vocational setting.
- Give the AELP facilitators providing the support reasonable access to provision and staff as required to support the action planning
- Allow the AELP facilitators providing the support and evaluations reasonable access to learners, staff and employers so that they can discuss the project and potential impact with them
- Allow key partners of this EEF project to have access to staff, training and the workshops for observation purposes
- Agree to access of their diagnostic data so that the impact of the pilot can be measured.

You may re-use this document/publication (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0.

To view this licence, visit <https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3> or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk)

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

This document is available for download at <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk>



The Education Endowment Foundation  
5th Floor, Millbank Tower  
21–24 Millbank  
London  
SW1P 4QP

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk>

 [@EducEndowFoundn](https://twitter.com/EducEndowFoundn)

 [Facebook.com/EducEndowFoundn](https://Facebook.com/EducEndowFoundn)