

Unlocking Learning? Towards Evidence-informed Policy and Practice in Education

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Executive summary

In complex, open democracies, such as those of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, there is a constant need for evidence to inform public discussion and decision-making by practitioners, managers, civil servants and politicians associated with education services. In societies with rich traditions of learning we also need to unlock the potential and to create more opportunities for learning to flourish.

SFRE extended an OECD CERl service of providing external ‘Country Reviews’ of educational research and development. It did this by structuring and facilitating processes of internal self-assessment and knowledge exchange within and between each UK country.

This report builds on the considerable amount of high quality research, practice and provision in education which exists in the UK – but it also accepts the provisional nature of evidence-informed knowledge and the complexity of decision-making in the field. It is firmly committed to working from this base towards more holistic effectiveness for each country and the UK as a whole. Complexity and diversity are seen as strengths within the devolved democracies of the UK and within the multiple layers of each educational sector and its research-user audiences.

Commitment, expertise and energy were very evident from representatives of the wide range of educational organisations contributing to SFRE. And yet it was apparent that the exchange and use of knowledge is constrained by the bonds of sectors, disciplines, roles and national jurisdictions. In short, too much knowledge about education in the UK is locked away. Often, this is caused by the boundaries of professional activity, with researchers, practitioners and policy-makers working in relative isolation from each other – but it is also about the accessibility of information which should be in the public domain. A major theme of the report is thus to affirm existing initiatives and resources and to suggest that effort should be focused on adding value and improving their overall effectiveness.

In particular, we draw attention to a fundamental enabling condition – the public availability of core information about research and evidence on education. At present, such services are not well configured and the issue, we believe, merits particular attention at this time. To support cost-effective sustainability and improve services to users, the consolidation of some key information resources is suggested.

This final report of SFRE 2008-10 is structured by a model representing six elements in the development and mobilisation of knowledge in education. Attempting to clarify these elements of comprehensive knowledge development and mobilisation systems is a major output from SFRE and will, it is hoped, enable organisations to review their roles and maximise complementarity and value for the system as a whole. SFRE’s six element representation of knowledge development and mobilisation, and its associated recommendations for contemporary UK systems, are:

Origination and planning – including the conditions and provision for the facilitation and prioritisation of research activity.

1. Governments and their agencies in each UK country should aim to support both responsive and prioritised research, recognising their complementarities in achieving both innovation and quality.
2. Strategic thinking about applied research should consider UK provision for long-term research on enduring issues as an effective way of providing evidence on immediate priorities, as well as enabling more sustained scientific development.
3. In establishing research priorities, there should be greater liaison between funders and stakeholders to improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of decisions.

Creation and production – focusing on both the initiation and carrying out of projects in respect of each major type of research.

4. Stakeholders in each country should regularly review provision for each of the major types of research in each key sector within their education systems and should consider the conditions which enable or constrain their development.
5. Collaboration among educational researchers in different areas and types of research should be encouraged, together with sustainable initiatives and incentives to promote more multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research and methodological innovation.
6. The active promotion of user engagement in applied research should continue.
7. Developmental and evaluative research should be used in proportionate ways for piloting, cost-benefit analysis, decision-making, review and measuring value in respect of major investments.
8. Practitioner enquiry should be an integral, long-term part of provision for professional development and knowledge creation in all educational sectors.

Assessment and validation – including peer judgement, user and beneficiary validation and the processes, criteria and indicators specific to each assessment context and type of research.

9. Criteria applied in the assessment of research quality should be appropriate for the research approach under consideration.
10. Work should continue on how to better align public aspirations for the relevance of applied research and academic criteria for its assessment and validation.
11. Producers of published research which is not subject to peer-review should provide sufficient methodological detail to enable critical assessment and validation of the work.

Collection and interpretation – concerning issues such as the processing of new knowledge in libraries and databases, empirical review and theoretical synthesis.

12. Those responsible for major UK-wide resources for the collection of evidence about education should be encouraged to explore consolidation to provide a sustainable, cost-effective, comprehensive, publicly accessible and user-orientated 'UK Education Research Information Service'.
13. In relation to knowledge interpretation and review, the value and complementary roles of academic scholarship and of synthesising organisations should be affirmed and incentivised where appropriate.
14. The aspiration to establish a single, centralised evidence organisation for education, comparable to NICE and offering recommendations for policy and practice, should be regarded as a step too far.

Mediation and brokerage – addressing the multifaceted promotional and communication strategies which enable the supply of and demand for evidence to be bridged.

15. The value, and limitations, of specialist research mediators and brokerage agencies should be recognised, particularly in relation to targeted sectoral or other audiences in each country.
16. A comprehensive map of the UK information landscape should be created to increase the accessibility of brokerage organisations and mediated research resources.
17. Universities, academics and other producers of research should make explicit provision for effective communication and mediation of findings as an integral part of their work.

Use and impact – considering the ways in which knowledge is used, scaled up and takes effect within policy and practice.

18. The expectation that those producing high quality applied research, development and evaluation should seek to maximise impact should be endorsed.
19. Practical and cultural barriers to the achievement of greater use and impact should progressively be tackled.
20. Systematic assessment of research impact should be approached with great care, bearing in mind the multiplicity of factors which can affect outcomes.