

SFRE Research Briefing

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



For too long, education practitioners, policy-makers and researchers have been trapped in their parallel worlds, peering at each other from afar – but their knowledge about education makes an essential contribution to democratic debate and to informed judgement in policy and practice. SFRE brought together stakeholders from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales for meetings during 2008-10. There is much to celebrate in UK provision. However, there are also significant, cost-effective opportunities for adding value. We need to unlock this potential. SFRE’s final report outlines six steps in the development and mobilisation of knowledge and makes suggestions for improvement.

Knowledge development and mobilisation	Key recommendations
Origination and planning: educational research is carried out in a wide variety of ways across the UK, but with limited strategic investment in studies of enduring issues.	To improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of strategic decisions, more liaison between funders and greater engagement of stakeholders is needed when establishing research priorities.
Creation and production: educational knowledge results from several complementary types of research, such as disciplinary, applied, evaluative and developmental, and practitioner enquiry.	UK stakeholders should regularly review provision for these types of research in the key sectors of their education systems and should consider the conditions which enable or constrain their development.
Assessment and validation: the promotion of user and academic engagement to address practical issues is at odds with pressures on researchers to achieve traditional markers of academic success.	There should be better alignment between public aspirations for the relevance of applied research and academic criteria for its assessment and validation.
Collection and interpretation: educational knowledge is essential to democratic debate and to decision-making in policy and practice – but its collection is fragmented and it thus remains inaccessible to its many potential users.	Those responsible for major UK-wide resources for the collection of evidence about education should be encouraged to provide a comprehensive, publicly accessible and user-orientated ‘UK Education Research Information Service’.
Mediation and brokerage: the communication of educational research requires specialist skills and is most effective when tailored to specific audiences.	A web-based map of the UK education information landscape should be created to increase awareness of brokerage organisations and mediated research resources.
Use and impact: the application of educational research remains uneven and many opportunities exist for adding value to existing knowledge and investments.	Practical and cultural barriers to the achievement of greater use and impact should progressively be tackled.

A model of knowledge development and mobilisation in education

SFRE's three major meetings (2008-10) were structured by a model of systemic knowledge management deriving from experience at OECD CERI. As consultation with stakeholders continued and the agenda unfolded, the model was incrementally developed.

SFRE brought policy makers, practitioners, researchers, mediators, funders and many others into a structured conversation. This showed, tantalisingly, the potential which is available if only research-informed knowledge about education could be unlocked in more sustained processes of engagement. Specific recommendations have been made, including one related to the vulnerability of what we believe is the most foundational and enabling part of our knowledge development and mobilisation system. Establishment of a UK Education

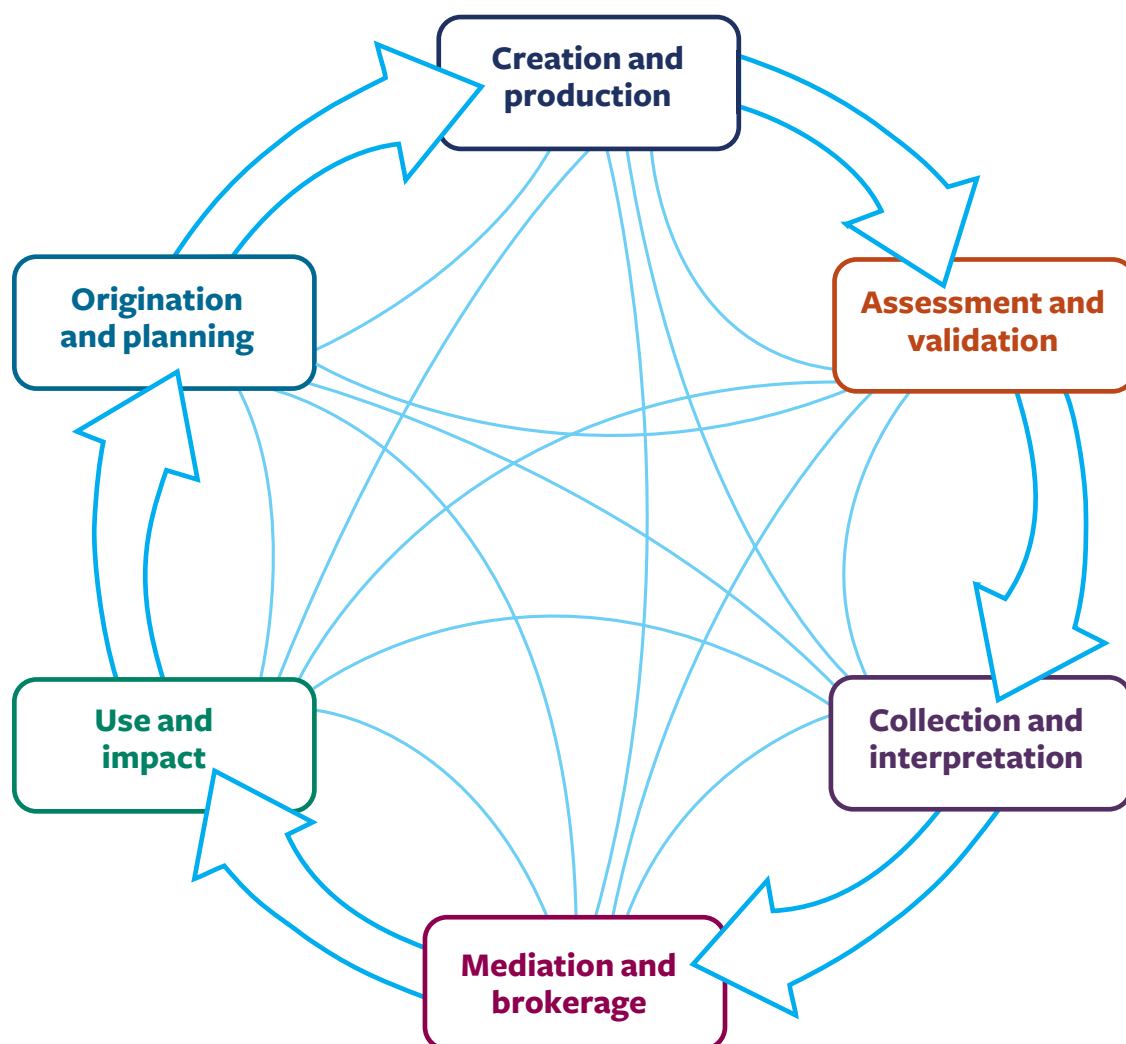
Information Service would significantly improve public access to knowledge about education and thus open up opportunities for distributed innovation across national systems. This can be seen as a condition for successful decentralisation. Just as a supply of clean water is taken for granted as underpinning public health, so a basic supply of knowledge, understanding and evidence about education is essential for a modern democracy.

However, perhaps the most important output from SFRE is the conceptualisation of 'knowledge development and mobilisation' itself. By teasing out the key elements of such a system, we have tried to both clarify these and present them as an interdependent whole for review, debate, evaluation – and thus improvement. Set within the overall

political and social context of each country, six elements of knowledge development and mobilisation are proposed:

- Origination and planning
- Creation and production
- Assessment and validation
- Collection and interpretation
- Mediation and brokerage
- Use and impact

The activities of SFRE demonstrated both of the richness and variability of provision within the UK. Whilst there are many examples of excellence in research development and mobilisation in education, there are also many spaces where provision is rudimentary or even absent. In societies with rich traditions of learning and many dedicated practitioners, we need to unlock the potential and to create more opportunities for learning to flourish.



Recommendations

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

- 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.
- Strategic thinking about applied research should consider provision for long-term research on enduring issues as an effective way of providing evidence on immediate priorities, as well as enabling scientific development.
- In establishing research priorities, there should be greater liaison between funders and stakeholders to improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of decisions.

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

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

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

- 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.
- A comprehensive map of the UK information landscape should be created to increase the accessibility of brokerage organisations and mediated research resources.
- 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.

Creation and production – both innovation and the completion of projects in respect of each major type of research

- 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.
- Collaboration among educational researchers in different areas and types of research should be encouraged, together with sustainable initiatives and incentives to promote more multi- and inter-disciplinary research and methodological innovation.
- The active promotion of user engagement in applied research should continue.
- Developmental and evaluative research should be used in proportionate ways for piloting, cost-benefit analysis, decision-making, review and measuring the value of major investments.
- Practitioner enquiry should be an integral, long-term part of provision for professional development and knowledge creation in all 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

- Criteria applied in the assessment of research quality should be appropriate for the research approach under consideration.
- Work should continue on how to better align public aspirations for the relevance of applied research and academic criteria for its assessment and validation.
- 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 – issues such as the processing of new knowledge in databases, empirical review and theoretical synthesis

- 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'.
- 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.
- 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.

About this briefing

This briefing is based on a review by Andrew Pollard and Alis Oancea of outcomes from discussions at meetings of the UK Strategic Forum for Research in Education held in Harrogate, Reading and Edinburgh during 2008-10. These discussions involved 144 researchers, policy makers, practitioners and representatives of practitioner organisations.

In reflecting on these meetings, we analysed and developed further an OECD CERI model for evaluating provision within particular OECD countries for generating and applying evidence in education. Versions of this had been previously used in assessing research provision in Denmark and Switzerland. The new SFRE version proposes six elements which might be identified within an effective national system for 'knowledge development and mobilization'.

The recommendations and the overall SFRE report were subject to comment and review at a SFRE Validation Meeting in May 2010 and by critical friends from the academic, policy-making and practitioner communities. The authors are grateful for this advice and have tried to take it into account. However, final responsibility for this text remains with its authors.

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References

The report from which this research briefing is drawn is:

Pollard, A. and Oancea, A. (2010) *Towards Evidence-informed Policy and Practice in Education. Final report of the UK Strategic Forum for Research in Education, 2008-2010*. SFRE: London.

Specific reports on three major meetings of SFRE are:

- **Pollard, A.** (Ed) (2008) *Quality and Capacity in UK Education Research. Report of the first meeting of the UK's Strategic Forum for Research in Education*. 16th and 17th October, Harrogate.
- **Tough, S.** (2009) *Disciplinary, Applied, Developmental and Practitioner Education Research in the UK. Report of the second meeting of the UK's Strategic Forum for Research in Education*. 17th and 18th June, Reading.
- **Oancea, A.** (Ed) (2010) *The Accumulation, Mediation, Application and Impact of Education Research Knowledge. Report of the third meeting of the UK's Strategic Forum for Research in Education*. 17th and 18th March, Edinburgh.

The SFRE website, at www.sfre.ac.uk, is a rich resource. In addition to providing downloads of the three reports above, it summarises the discussions at each event and deploys this information into the structure of topics which formed the SFRE agenda. It thus provides a holistic overview of SFRE deliberations. The website also provides further reports and supporting materials on the development and use of educational research, many of which were commissioned specifically for SFRE.

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