

Introduction

In developed countries across the world, the role of evidence is now recognised in informing public discussion and decision-making by practitioners, managers and politicians associated with education. This however, is not a straightforward process as CfBT's recent report makes clear in documenting the generally weak and variable influence of evidence over 40 years of policy-making in England (Perry, Amadeo, Fletcher and Walker, 2010). The nature and circumstances of political judgement obviously plays a crucial role here. But to stop there would be far too easy.

The present report derives from a three year initiative focused on the way educational research is generated and made available for application, as well as on its actual use. The UK Strategic Forum for Research in Education (SFRE) was thus underpinned by the view that systems for the provision and use of knowledge about education within any country can both be conceptualised as an object of study and are amenable to review, strategic decision and improvement in effectiveness.

This view had been promoted in a European Commission Staff Working Document (European Commission, 2007 a) and, most significantly, was illustrated in the gradual development by OECD CERI of a template for reviewing education research infrastructures in different countries. From 2000 to 2006, external teams of visiting 'examiners' collaborated in the production of OECD CERI Country Reviews of research and development systems in education.¹ These initiatives were designed to: 'review the extent to which the educational R&D system within a country is functioning as a repository of knowledge on which practitioners and policy-makers can draw'. Country Reviews were carried out in New Zealand, England, Mexico, Denmark and Switzerland.

The main question posed by the Country Reviews thus concerned the effectiveness of each national system in the production and use of educational research. This overarching issue and its associated structure of topics also framed SFRE deliberations.

However, in SFRE, the evaluation was designed to be internal and participative and the process was managed as one of self-review over time. Each of the three SFRE events organised from 2008 to 2010 was thus intended to be enabling, so that those attending from practice, policy and research communities could share perspectives whilst maintaining a common sense of purpose.

Attendees at SFRE came from across our UK education system, as Appendix 1 shows. They brought not only knowledge and expertise from a wide range of organisations and settings, but also enthusiasm and interest. There was a 'buzz' at SFRE meetings which, we think, can be attributed to the boundary-crossing which was intrinsic to the exercise. For too long, practitioners, policy-makers, researchers and research mediators have been trapped in seemingly parallel worlds, peering at each other from afar. This relative isolation is deepened by sectoral, disciplinary and national boundaries. Such specialist roles and institutional arrangements offer cultural security and even career and institutional progression – but the cost in unrealised potential, we believe, is heavy.

Our experience of SFRE suggests that much knowledge about education in the UK is locked away. Some of the richest and most authentic sources can be found in classrooms, lecture theatres and workshops, but is trapped by lack of shared analytic frameworks and language for public discourse. Many more perceptive, challenging and innovative analyses

¹ See www.oecd.org/document/39/0,3343,en_2649_35845581_31236711_1_1_1_1,00.html

are embedded in academic practices, from which they struggle to break free in accessible and timely ways. For many years, teacher education institutions have tried to bridge these worlds – often hampered, rather than enabled, by national policy frameworks which have also been trapped within a particular set of imperatives. More recently, as the rhetoric of evidence-informed improvement has swept the world, new brokerage agencies have emerged to try to ameliorate the situation, and they too must take the risks of attempting to cross the no-man’s-land between theory, practice and policy.

We need to unlock our collective potential – to provide increased public access to existing knowledge about education and to improve the conditions which enable new learning about educational policies and practices to flourish.

SFRE was thus an exercise in improving awareness of interconnections and considering overall systemic effectiveness, whilst also learning about and affirming a very wide range of initiatives, provision and expertise from across the UK.

This report is founded on a realist and open position. It accepts the provisionality of research evidence and the complexity of decision-making within UK education. And yet it is firmly committed to working from this base and building on this diversity towards more holistic effectiveness for each country and the UK as a whole. Complexity and diversity are seen as strengths within the devolved and sophisticated democracies of the UK and within the complex multi-layered intricacies of each educational sector and its research-user audiences.

Consideration of outcomes at SFRE suggests that attempts to impose centralised order on this complexity would be counterproductive. However, to improve services to users and to support cost-effective sustainability, consideration of the consolidation of some existing information resources is suggested in this report. Indeed, the main proposition is that, because of the difficult economic situation, effort should be focused on adding value and improving the overall effectiveness of existing initiatives and resources.

It is not anticipated that such processes of consolidation and development would necessarily be linear or quick. Rather, evolution may take many years. For this reason, the work of SFRE may in future need to be replicated or taken up again by leading stakeholders.

The report begins by describing the specific aims and activities of SFRE. In Section II, a brief review of contemporary provision within England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales is provided. Section III describes the model of knowledge development and mobilisation which has evolved from SFRE and highlights major associated issues which arose in discussion. Recommendations for action are also offered. The final part of the report reviews cross-cutting issues and draws conclusions.

This report will be shared with stakeholders in each UK country and with organisations concerned with the UK as a whole. Whilst each country is distinct, the educational issues faced have much in common and there are experiences to share about the development and use of evidence. There may even be economies of effort and added value in sharing some resources.