

Section I. The activities of SFRE

I.1. SFRE aims and organisation

The SFRE was established to support multiple stakeholders in all four countries of the UK and many educational sectors in reflecting on education research. Underpinning this endeavour is the sustained contemporary demand for high quality research evidence about education from government, public services, students, parents, businesses and others.

The SFRE aims:

- In the light of international good practice, to maintain an overview of the UK system and national sub-systems for the production of new knowledge in education and for its transformation, dissemination and use as a whole.
- To facilitate networking for the exchange of information and the sharing of good practice concerning the organisation, production and use of educational research within the UK.
- To make recommendations for processes and infrastructure needed to address the long-term sustainability, development and improvement of educational research within the UK, including the identification of research priorities and of particular initiatives and investments to address such concerns.

The initiative was led by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), with funding being provided by BERA, ESRC, DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families, England) and CfBT Education Trust. The initial cycle of SFRE activity consisted of three national Forum events, addressing key issues in relation to the creation, accumulation, interpretation, valuing, mediation and impact of different types of education research. Detailed reports emerging from each of these events were widely distributed and also made available on the Forum's website.

SFRE has been managed by a Planning Group which oversaw the running of the project and provided expert advice and input to each of the three Forum events forming the initial cycle. The Planning Group was chaired by Andrew Pollard, Director of the TLRP (Teaching and Learning Research Programme) based in London. Membership of the Planning Group was drawn from all areas of the UK with representatives of government and academic communities, as well as of the core funding organisations of SFRE. The 2010 members of the planning group were:

Chair: Andrew Pollard (Teaching and Learning Research Programme/Institute of Education, University of London)

Wales: Sue Davies (Trinity College, Carmarthen/ BERA Council) and Debbie Tynen, Strategy Unit (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, Welsh Assembly Government)

Scotland: Lorna Hamilton (University of Edinburgh) and Fiona Fraser, Principal Researcher (Analytical Services Unit (schools), Scottish Government)

Northern Ireland: Ruth Leitch (Queen's University Belfast/ BERA Council) and Karen McCullough (Department of Education, Northern Ireland)

England: Deborah Wilson (Department for Children, Schools and Families), Stephen Witt (Department for Children, Schools and Families), Richard Bartholomew (Department for Children, Schools and Families) and Sean Hayes, Head of Information, Research & Statistics (Greenwich Children's Services, Greenwich Council)

UK: Andy Gibbs, Head of the Economy, Education, Business and Society Team (Economic and Social Research Council), Ann Jeffcott, Research Directorate (Economic and Social Research Council), Helen Perkins, Director (Society for Research into Higher Education) and Karen Whitby, Research Manager (CfBT Education Trust)

Researcher: Alis Oancea (University of Oxford/ BERA Council)

Project Manager: Jeremy Hoad, Chief Executive (BERA).

The three major meetings of SFRE were each chaired and facilitated by Andrew Pollard. In preparing for and reporting on these, Sarah Tough led as SFRE Researcher for the Harrogate and Reading meetings. Alis Oancea fulfilled this role for the third meeting in Edinburgh.

1.2. SFRE principles

The activity of the SFRE from 2008 to 2010 was supported by a set of principles, which guided decisions about the topics covered at SFRE meetings, the questions asked, the contributions invited and the structure, participation and ways of working of the events organised. These aspects of the activity of the SFRE were open to input from any of the constituencies involved and feedback was regularly sought and acted upon. In particular, it was made clear to participants that the conceptual frameworks and modes of working proposed, drawing on available literature, aimed to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among participants, rather than assuming consensus or attempting to rigidly structure interactions or outcomes.

Some of the principles underpinning the work of the SFRE were epistemological, others, operational. They were articulated more fully over time as they benefited from the collective experience of the three events organised. At the heart of these principles is an argument for recognising the importance, diversity and provisionality of research knowledge about education, while investing in opportunities for constructive deliberation about this knowledge via open dialogue and cooperative initiatives involving a wide range of stakeholders.

1) Commitment to evidence-informed improvement

The provision of evidence and understanding about educational processes and performance can make a significant contribution to democratic deliberations about an education system, to its effectiveness in achieving outcomes for learners and to its accountability. In principle, it is always possible to make improvements in both quality and cost-effectiveness, and this was certainly apparent from the sequence of SFRE events.

2) The diversity of sources of evidence

The evidence available to decision-makers comes from many sources, including evidence from different types of research, but also policy-maker and practitioner experience, learner interpretations, public perceptions and social norms. There are diverse ways of seeking and integrating this evidence, as well as logically different ways of explaining and interpreting it. It is important to recognize the different contributions of different types of research and to facilitate conversations that draw appropriately on the strengths of each.

3) The nature of social scientific knowledge

Our knowledge about the social world grows through challenge and criticism. Social researchers seek and refine the best evidence available to tackle important questions, but we need to recognise that evidence is not the same as unquestionable proof. The relative provisionality of knowledge about education can be seen as both a limitation (e.g. very few straightforward and definitive answers to problems) and a strength (e.g. requiring more open and ethical ways of working and ensuring constant quality checks). Effective management of evidence should start with realistic expectations.

4) The constructive exercise of judgement

Reasonable decision-making, be it in the context of policy or of practice, needs to weigh and balance available sources of evidence and types of explanation and interpretation. This deliberative process has a strong ethical dimension and should allow for different voices to be heard, different interest communities to be represented and different perspectives to be taken into account. The full range of types of research can contribute to this process and should be drawn upon as required by the questions being asked and the goals pursued. SFRE's way of working was also underpinned by this commitment to constructive deliberation.

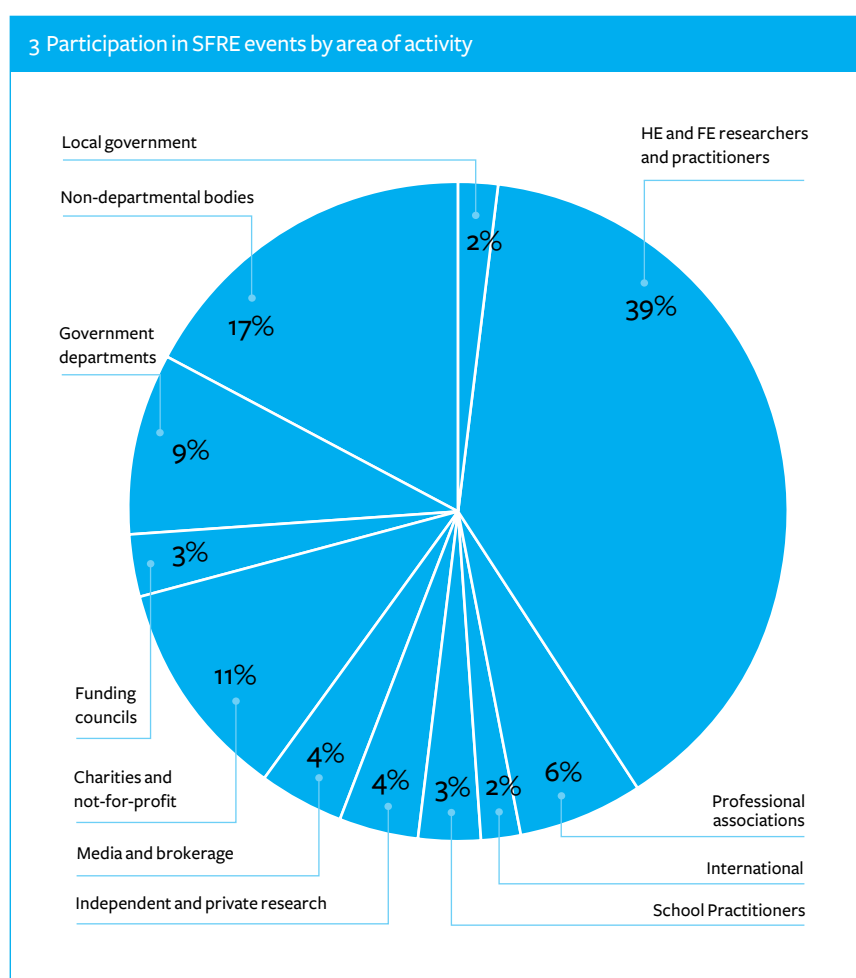
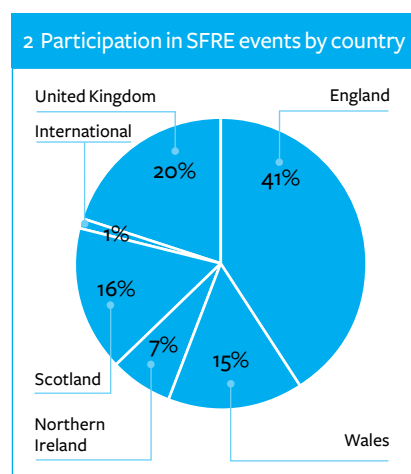
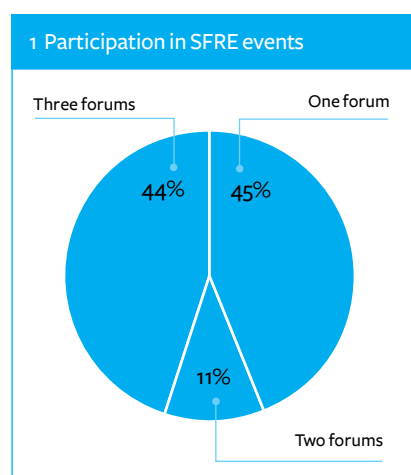
5) Cooperation

SFRE's mode of working encouraged collaboration among the different constituencies with an interest in education research, within and outside the activities organised as part of the Forum's programme. This approach was also consistent with the original setting up of the SFRE, as a collaborative initiative supported by four different funders (BERA, ESRC, DCSF and CfBT) and drawing together partners from all countries of the UK. Many of the national bodies represented on the SFRE took it upon themselves to act as catalysts of further cooperative developments and initiatives in their countries. Examples of such developments are included in the country reviews section of this report.

6) Representation

Throughout the activity of the SFRE, care was taken to ensure representation of all the countries, range of institutions/organisations and sectors. The three SFRE meetings brought together over 70 participants on each occasion, including researchers, practitioners, research mediators and policymakers from each of the constituent countries, from different types of institution and across many sectors. At each event, in order to offer continuity, there were participants who had attended a previous Forum, but many who had not been involved in SFRE previously were also invited in order to inject new perspectives to the discussions and to spread awareness of the initiative. Private and not-for-profit organisations also attended, as these organisations play a significant role in education research in the UK. Figures 1, 2 and 3 show the distribution of the total of 144 participants to SFRE by country, area of activity and continuity of engagement in SFRE activities (see Appendix 1). Invitations were made to enable a balance between continuity and diversity. Organisations representing school practitioners were engaged to offset the difficulty for those who were invited of obtaining leave.

Figures 1, 2 and 3. Participation in SFRE events (% of total number of individual participants)



1.3. SFRE framework

As we have seen, the activity of the SFRE was heavily influenced by the OECD CERl's Country Reviews of educational research and development in New Zealand, England, Mexico, Denmark and Switzerland between 2000 and 2006. The teams of international experts assembled for these reviews gradually developed a clearer sense of what might be expected in any national system. Formalisation of this began with the Danish review in 2004 and was taken forward in work in Switzerland during 2006 – a review in which Pollard had participated as an assessor. In its most recent manifestation (see Pollard, 2007) the OECD CERl template probed national provision through twenty questions, organised in six sections:

- Contextual issues
- Strategic awareness
- Basic research
- Applied research
- Development and professional enquiry
- Generic issues.

For the purposes of the UK SFRE, a simpler framework was generated to suit a sequence of internal discussion in three forums over three years. The SFRE framework, while inspired by the OECD CERl experience, was the product of discussions across a range of UK constituencies with interest in education research. The challenges considered by the SFRE can thus be represented in the following ways:

Forum I

Context: What are the contextual circumstances of each country and its aspirations for educational development? What is the nature of existing educational R&D provision and the major contemporary challenges to it?

Quality: What quality assurance and accountability procedures are in place for educational research and development?

Capacity: Is there adequate capacity building to sustain complementary forms of educational research and development?

Forum II

Disciplinary research: Is there appropriate provision and incentivisation for the production of high quality research in disciplines contributing to the field of education?

Applied research: Is there appropriate provision and incentivisation for the production of high quality and innovative applied research?

Developmental research: Is there appropriate provision and incentivisation for the production of high quality and innovative developmental research, evaluation and practitioner enquiry?

Interdisciplinarity: Given growing awareness of the interconnectedness of education and other fields, how is interdisciplinary research supported?

Priorities: How are researchers, policymakers, practitioners and other appropriate stakeholders engaged in the identification, development, application and evaluation of national priorities for applied research and for development?

Forum III

Knowledge accumulation: What provision is there for knowledge accumulation and review and for appropriate linkage to UK and international networks, centres and activities?

Knowledge mediation: What provision is there for appropriate co-production, transformation and dissemination of research findings to stakeholders, including the general public and democratic process – and how effective is this?

Knowledge use and impact: Is there an impact strategy for educational R&D in each relevant educational sector, with clear understandings of what counts as disciplinary and applied research and of what counts as forms of development by practitioners and others – and the funding streams and organisational infrastructures to support these activities?

The above framework helped to focus the discussions at the three SFRE meetings and to structure their reporting. However, an important outcome of the SFRE process was also the questioning and refinement of this framework, in the attempt to make it a more effective tool in supporting further cooperation and dialogue. This report will make use of this more developed framework to structure the analysis of the discussions held at the SFRE events and of their conclusions and recommendations.

1.4. SFRE meetings

Forum I

Forum I took place in Harrogate in October 2008. This Forum considered the questions outlined above regarding context, quality and capacity in the constituent countries. Discussions took place within country groups so that the specific context of education research in each country could be explored. These discussions were supported by country stimulus reports (Morris, 2008; Leitch, 2008; Brown, 2008; Daugherty and Davies, 2008) which were prepared in advance and offered initial analysis of the state of play in relation to quality and capacity issues in education research in each country (these reports are available to download on the SFRE website: www.sfre.ac.uk/publications/forum-1/stimulus-reports/). Discussions at the first Forum noted that while there were varied levels of provision for research production and application in different countries, there was a particularly strong common challenge around effective research dissemination and mediation. There are also obstacles in terms of the historical structure of teacher education departments in HEIs and consequential challenges in the contemporary direction of travel towards more interdisciplinary work.

The complex issue of quality in education research was tackled at Forum I in professional groups – i.e. policymakers, practitioners and researchers and in sector groups (compulsory and post-compulsory). The discussions on quality and what criteria should be used in assessing quality confirmed that, whilst there were many issues in common, particular priorities in relation to these issues were maintained by different stakeholder groups. These tensions were explored and it was obvious that, although a number of generic concerns (e.g. about theoretical and methodological robustness, or about engagement and communication) were shared across a number of contexts, no single set of criteria could be identified². Rather, it was necessary to recognise that different types of research had particular purposes and aims – with consequential variations in determinants of quality.

The final theme for Forum I was capacity. The overall level and distribution of researchers meant that there were concerns regarding capacity for research production in some key areas. Northern Ireland and Wales have particular issues around critical mass in some areas due to their smaller size. The effects of funding allocation mechanism are also felt very acutely. A key capacity challenge touched upon in Forum I was the capacity of researchers to effectively disseminate and frame their work for users (policymakers and practitioners) and the capacity of users to engage with research and the research process at a deeper level. An issue relating to both capacity and quality was that there appeared to be a growing disconnection between those involved primarily with teacher education and those undertaking education research – at both individual and institutional levels.

More details of the discussions and events of the first Forum are in the report from this event (Pollard, 2008) which is available to download, alongside presentation slides, stimulus reports and supplementary papers, on the SFRE website (see: www.sfre.ac.uk/forum-1/).

² A project to document in more detail such variations in views on research quality in education was subsequently commissioned by TLRP from Alis Oancea. For the outcome, see TLRP Research Briefing No 80 at: www.tlrp.org/pub/research.html.

In the period of time from Forum I to Forum II, the outcomes of the fifth round of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE 2008) and corresponding funding allocations were announced. In their review of research quality, the Sub-Panel for Education concluded that: ‘the quality of research activity reported in the submissions was high and significantly improved from 2001’ (RAE, 2009). They stated: ‘it is clear that the best departments can compete on equal terms with the strongest departments

anywhere in the world'. There was also growth in the range of institutions attracting quality-related funding in education, with 41 institutions achieving new funding. These outcomes suggested that the field had been significantly strengthened since 2001.

Forum II

Forum II provided a space to discuss the provision and incentivisation of different types of research in each country and in the UK as a whole. The discussions were informed by a conceptual framework distinguishing between different types of research (disciplinary, applied, development and evaluation, practitioner research and enquiry) and mapping them across different sectors and contexts. There was much debate during the event about the definitions of the different types of research identified in the framework. Participants recognised the value of such framework as a means of organising thoughts and discussions, but they also felt that there was often considerable overlap, for example between 'applied', 'evaluative and developmental' and 'practitioner' research.

Ahead of the Forum short contributions were prepared from a number of disciplines which contribute to the education field. These outlined the contribution a particular discipline made to education research and to interdisciplinarity. Written contributions covered philosophy (Bridges, 2009), economics (Vignoles, 2009), sociology (Francis, 2009), social anthropology (Mills, 2009), history (Richardson, 2009), neuroscience (Goswami, 2009) and psychology (Lunt, 2009). This selection of disciplines was intended to give a flavour of the wide variety of disciplines upon which education research is based. The discussions stimulated by these presentations, while recognising the enduring contribution of the disciplines to research knowledge in education, also acknowledged the complexity of the disciplinary landscape of education research, the permeable disciplinary boundaries of different bodies of work in education and the constantly changing institutional conditions for disciplinary work (see Furlong and Lawn, 2010).

Planning Group members from each of the UK countries also drafted reports which pulled together examples of applied, evaluative and developmental and practitioner research in their country and, to stimulate discussion, proposed areas for development/improvement. The disciplinary information was collated separately due to the international nature of this type of research. The disciplinary statements and country mappings are available to download on the SFRE website (see: www.sfre.ac.uk/publications/forum-ii-publications/input-documents-for-forum-ii). Notes from each discussion group are available on the SFRE website (see: www.sfre.ac.uk/forum-2). Tom Schuller (NIACE, formerly OECD CERl) participated in the event as an external reviewer of the proceedings and John Selby (HEFCE) closed the event with his thoughts and observations (see: www.sfre.ac.uk/forum-2).

Forum III

The third SFRE meeting, in Edinburgh, adopted a very participative format, consisting of cycles of questions, case studies, group discussions and reflective commentaries on each of the topics addressed: accumulation, mediation and impact of education research knowledge.

Knowledge accumulation was recognised by participants to the third Forum as having a vital role to play in any knowledge management system. However, a distinction between the accumulation and interpretation of knowledge was felt to be significant and to enable the role of theorised synthesis to be acknowledged. Interpretive syntheses of cumulative knowledge, when critical, rigorous, fit-for-purpose and appropriately theorised, have the potential to improve the effectiveness through which policy-makers are informed and practitioners empowered.

The UK infrastructure for knowledge accumulation is very diverse in terms of libraries, electronic resources, databases/indexes and repositories, though there are also some core resources. There is at present considerable variation in terms of infrastructure for accumulation and interpretation between countries and sectors and also from topic to topic. Despite the potential of new technologies, users still face significant barriers in

accessing evidence in education because of limited access to some resources, variable quality assurance and fragmentation of sources.

Effective research mediation was perceived by many SFRE participants as not only being an attribute of a good research environment but also as indicator of a well-functioning evidence-informed democracy. At present, there are inadequate incentives, training and infrastructures for research mediation, with variable reward structures in different sectors and professional communities. Contributing to the interpretation and application of research findings was seen as being part of the contemporary role of professional researchers. However, the brokerage role of media and communication specialists to support dissemination and impact processes was confirmed. It was noted that this requires good understanding of the relevant epistemic, methodological and political constraints as well as practical media and communication skills.

In terms of outputs, discussions at the forum highlighted the importance of tailoring writing styles and presentation formats to the full range of audiences. Capacity for cost-effective production of such outputs is limited, but rapidly changing technologies create many opportunities for innovation. In terms of processes, it was agreed that mediation should encourage both the supply of and demand for, relevant and credible evidence, as well as the interplay between the two. Expectations of user engagement, co-production and dialogue between stakeholders at all research stages were seen as significant advances on simple 'knowledge transfer'. However, despite this attractive rationale, the capacity and commitment of researchers, practitioners and policy-makers remains limited at present.

Impact was not seen as a clear-cut concept. At both system and individual levels, research evidence does not simply compel to action but is filtered through judgments about aims and values and balanced against other forms of evidence and incentives to action. At present, systemic institutional development to use research is embryonic and the role of 'champions' in the use of evidence from practitioner, policy-maker and researcher communities remains vital in achieving impact. Strategies for educational research impact in the UK should aim to promote potential impact, to support current use of evidence in practice and to create enabling conditions for further engagement with research evidence among practitioners and other relevant constituencies. The measurement of actual impact for research assessment purposes should be secondary to this.

Presentation slides, notes on plenary sessions, including case studies, rapporteur's notes on group discussions and the overall SFRE III report are available from the SFRE website, at www.sfre.ac.uk/forum-3.

1.5. SFRE reports and website

Reports on three major meetings of SFRE are:

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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.
- 3) 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 has 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.

www.sfre.ac.uk is organised by:

- FORUM I, II, III (presentations, reports and perspectives at each main event)
- KEY QUESTIONS (a collation of SFRE deliberations in relation to each structuring issue)
- COUNTRIES (descriptions of contemporary activity and provision for UK countries)
- PUBLICATIONS and RESOURCES (key references and information for further study).