

Section IV. Cross-cutting issues in evidence informed policy and practice

Reviewing the model of knowledge mobilisation as a whole, some recurring themes were apparent.

IV.1. Demand for research in education

We have noted the strength, across the UK, of commitment in principle to the use of evidence to inform policy, to support the work of sectoral providers and to enhance professional practice. In the case of policy and the organisation of provision, research is seen as making an important contribution to democratic debate, decision-making and implementation. In relation to practice, practitioner enquiry is felt to have a unique role enhancing contextualised judgement and professional development.

However, there was concern at SFRE that this commitment to the use of evidence is not always followed through. In particular, evidence which does not reinforce previously endorsed policy positions, institutional arrangements or established forms of practice is much less likely to be taken up and used. This may be caused by a lack of open-mindedness, but it also reflects that fact that, for users, research evidence is always in competition with other forms of understanding, pressures and constraints. If realised demand for research in education is to develop, one message for researchers is that the value of such evidence must continue to be promoted. In our democratic contexts, it is reasonable to expect more systematic use of research in decision-making and to question the social responsibility of decisions taken in the face of evidence. However, really strong demand for evidence is likely to derive only from strong user engagement and sustained demonstration of the practical utility and principled value of research. Many people and organisations have roles to play in achieving this.

IV.2. Supply of research in education

In this report and in SFRE deliberations generally, the strengths and weaknesses of research resources in each UK country were acknowledged to be very variable. England is by far the largest country and has overlapping providers in respect of most issues on which evidence is needed, whether from HE or the private or third sector. This is not the case in Northern Ireland and Wales, where HE research expertise in education is relatively small and concentrated. Private and third sector providers fill some gaps but the production of contextually specific evidence on the range of educational issues needed to by policy-makers, providers and practitioners is sometimes difficult in these countries. Scotland is poised between for, with more scale and strong educational and scientific traditions, it generates a significant supply of research evidence. None the less, it is likely that, if funds were available, all four countries would want to enhance the supply of contextualised research and evidence available to them.

However, those attending SFRE recognised that there is a rich supply of high quality original research being generated across the world as a whole. Academic processes of review and synthesis are used to evaluate and interpret such work and this is then available for consideration in national contexts. Whilst the difficulty of such re-contextualisation should not be underestimated, the development of common themes in international understanding is notable. There is a place for improving the harvesting of such work in relation to particular priorities so that application in national and sectoral contexts can be considered. Such processes would, of course, be far cheaper than initiating new projects.

Knowledge mobilisation in Canada

Canada has an established record of seeking to use research evidence in educational policy and practice. A critical mass of work has developed, initiated by health funders. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada now supports researchers to undertake empirical studies of knowledge mobilisation (see Cooper & Levin, 2010). This has informed initiatives to build the capacity of policy makers to make better use of evidence. In Ontario for example, The Evaluation and Research Learning Program, consists of six modules that equip ministry staff and managers with the knowledge and ability to use research and evaluation effectively for decision-making. An example of developing infrastructure to support practitioner engagement with research is Journal Watch (Gough et al, 2009). Here, a group of researchers and practitioners working in child welfare, search journals monthly and review them through videoconferences. They then prepare short reviews of exceptional articles that are shared with the broader community of child welfare researchers and practitioners across Canada, through an electronic newsletter. This group are essentially mediating research for a wider audience and potentially training both new researchers and practitioners in critical inquiry. A research programme in Toronto, Research Supporting Practice in Education, set up a 'Facts in Education' service aiming to correct significant factual errors about education that appear in the news media across Canada. A panel of experts use well established evidence to address the issues and provide further reading. For more information, see www.oise.utoronto.ca/rspe

Our thanks to Judy Sebba for the Canadian case.

IV.3. Fitness for purpose

At SFRE meetings, recognition of different types of research and enquiry was seen as being extremely important. In particular, it enabled particular contributions to be affirmed and it strengthened appreciation of complementarity. It was felt that failure to recognise such differences had, in the past, produced many unproductive arguments within the field and had contributed significantly to the external critiques of education research in the 1990s.

It was also acknowledged that different epistemological assumptions exist in relation to the generation and interpretation of knowledge. Rather than seeking to impose a single position, this was seen as a source of richness. In particular, the existence of difference, debate and challenge was appreciated as being essential to innovation, testing and the establishment of new understanding. Whilst this most obviously applied within the academy, openness to challenge was seen as being important in all fields of decision-making and professional practice.

To be constructive however, challenges needed to be appropriate in relation to research purposes and contexts.

IV.4. Quality

This theme pervaded all considerations, as it should. Indeed, the constant search for improvement is an indicator of all professional activity.

However, the field of educational research has characteristics which further justify the need for this awareness. In particular, it is extremely large and diverse. Thus, whilst there is no doubt that much world class research, development and enquiry takes place in the UK, there are also activities about which we can be less confident.

The same can be said for journalists and organisations concerned with mediation, brokerage and application. Here we find many who carefully weigh and evaluate evidence, but others who are more cavalier.

Scrutiny of the quality of evidence and its interpretation is thus intrinsic to all aspects of knowledge generation and mobilisation.

IV.5. Capacity

UK capacity to conduct high quality research was felt to be significant as a whole, but to be vulnerable in relation to the age profile of many researchers and availability of some skill sets. Within Wales and Northern Ireland in particular, there was recognition that the number of active educational researchers was limited and could not always meet appropriate demand.

The capacity of user organisations to commission, evaluate and apply research was a second strong theme. Expertise was often highly concentrated in key individuals and it was not clear whether such capacity was always fully institutionalised. More training and support in developing expertise and resilience were considered to be important.

Existing mediation and brokerage in relation to specific, sectoral audiences in each country was affirmed at SFRE – much of which was provided by private or third sector bodies. However, this capacity was patchy and ways of enabling further provision and promoting that which existed were felt to be worth developing.

IV.6. Diversity and core enabling services

The SFRE model of knowledge development and mobilisation enables reflection on the roles of different institutions and initiatives in each country. Participation in SFRE has increased awareness of the inter-dependence of different elements and a number of new initiatives have emerged in each country. Not all, of course, will survive forthcoming financial cut-backs.

The process of SFRE itself demonstrated the commitment and creativity which exists across the UK in relation to the development of provision for evidence-informed policy and practice. The establishment and work of organisations such as EEP, TTRB, ARTTS, WERN, LTScotland, LSIS, C4EO, GTCE, GTCS, etc, etc, are very impressive – and there are many more.

Such initiatives reflect the diversity of the post-devolution UK and are sectorally responsive. In considering UK ‘systems’ and national ‘sub-systems’ this is probably just as it should be.

However, such organisations need core information to work with and to help in unlocking their potential – hence the recommendation in this report that consideration be given to the consolidation or networking of relevant organisations to form a UK Education Information Service. Were such services to be secured, we recommend then trusting to initiatives within each country and sector, and simply complementing these with a web portal and guidance facility to enhance awareness of and access to such sources in the UK and beyond.

IV.7. Value for money

Despite public affirmation of the importance of evidence, long-term national infrastructures for the production, dissemination and application of new knowledge sometimes seems complex – but it is also fragile.

Indeed, worthwhile initiatives come and go. Sometimes such initiatives are reliant on government funding, sometimes on the commitment or interests of higher education institutions, sometimes they draw on research associations, charities, companies and even individuals. There are thousands of educational organisations in the UK which are supportive of the use of research evidence in policy and practice. However, overall, complexity and a lack of information results in considerable waste in effort and resource.

Development of the SFRE model of knowledge development and mobilisation has the potential to improve this situation.

First, the roles of different institutions and investments can be clarified through discussion of functions in relation to the model overall. This should support more explicit evaluation of quality and value.

Second, the importance of different institutions and investments can be considered, and decisions taken about where responsibility for provision should lie. We have argued that a UK Education Information Service, accessed through a public web-portal and guidance service, is the most essential and cost-effective form of provision. With a light touch and at relatively low cost, this would enable and support diverse local, institutional, sectoral and national initiatives for knowledge interpretation, mediation and brokerage.