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EPI and edpol roundtable:
Opportunities for research
reform

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How might education research and evaluation for policy makers be best organised, funded and presented?

edpol report of meeting

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Tabled papers:

See edpol.net: Education funding, organization and presentation (for England 2018/19)

See EPI.org.uk: How nations organise, focus and fund and their research for policy making (for South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Finland and Scotland)

The views and opinions below are unattributed quotes and paraphrasing of individual comments: they reflect the discussion and are not necessarily supported by all attendees. There should be no inference of complete agreement unless otherwise stated.

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Overview

The experience of contributors was wide-ranging and covered: ministerial decision making, DfE strategy, policy and research, through to “supply side” experience including DfE sponsored projects, independent research and university departments. The discussion was largely confined to research and evidence to support policy makers, rather than practitioners. (The summary does, however, cover some interesting comments on eliciting demand and engagement for practitioner research).

Most of the discussion pointed to a lack of process. Other than prescribed DfE research grants, there is little or no system to connect research and evidence from the wider community with policy making in government – partly because of the highly fragmented research community, but also because of ministers’ ambivalence towards evidence. The situation is aggravated, it would seem, by an inconsistent approach in the Department for Education. Combined, these factors beget a suboptimal interaction between policy makers and the research community, leading to “a divide” that has several dimensions: a mismatch of expectation, a cultural separation and an imbalance in the areas of research undertaken i.e. relatively little serving policy makers (*NB, a case was put after the roundtable that elements of DfE practice have improved in recent years*).

A robust case was put forward to validate aspects of academic research. In particular, infrastructure that supported longitudinal studies, foundation work and independent research that was “the seedbed for new creative ideas”. That said, it was also acknowledged that research work varied widely in quality and could be difficult to access. Ultimately, it was acknowledged that we need a structured system that supports both directed and independent research, but we are a long way from this.

There were many practical suggestions to make improvements. The three with most resonance were to:

- better set the research agenda
- further develop relationships (between users and providers)
- thoroughly improve research access and synthesis

There was strong support for ministers and the DfE providing greater guidance on research needs for policy making, but with lack of continuity and poor institutional memory at the most senior level, there were also proposals to gain guidance from an advisory board, or from Select Committees. All participants are interested to see relationships deepened, but these are typically held together by process and there were concerns that, as in the past, efforts might not be sustained. There was widespread support for greater synthesis of research. In this area, proposals were made for funding, training and deploying academics. The Youth Endowment Fund have followed a different path and they are rapidly creating systematic reviews with the Campbell Collaboration.

On several occasions, concerns were raised about the nature of incremental change and whether this will fail, as have other initiatives in the past. At the heart of the matter is a lack of long-term thinking, system failure and an unwillingness to evaluate programmes. Perhaps the necessary change requires greater disruption to the status quo, while maintaining the richness and diversity of current research.

1. Research and an inconsistent system

Reflections on policy making highlighted highly variable interaction between policy makers and the research community. In material areas, there was no evidence of any type of “system”. These challenges arose in the centre of decision making, through to the providers of research.

1.1 Research not reaching decision makers

Ministers in office can see relatively little research – to the extent that they may know virtually nothing about the research that is undertaken within the department or outside the department. Rarely are there conversations at a ministerial level about the impact that evidence and research might have on education policy decision making. Similarly, most policies continue without being evaluated and ministers may only want to hear about positive evaluation, because they may have already committed to and embarked on rolling out a policy.

1.2 Some ministers may not want to see the evidence

Policymakers seem to be more willing to delegate decision-making about what happens in the classroom, but less willing to seek out and act according to evidence relating to system-led policy decisions, such as the continuation of the academy programme or the best route for initial teacher training.

One contributor on the supply side believed that it was certainly not always the case that ministers really wanted the evidence. An example was given of a proposed policy where preliminary research had revealed doubts about the policy’s efficacy. However, ministers weren’t prepared to fund any additional research to understand the problems or to propose solutions, instead the doubts were simply ignored.

1.3 Ineffective management of research in the DfE

There were suggestions that the management of research in the DfE is inconsistent and at worse, is ineffective. For example, senior researchers in the DfE may be “sitting on significant evidence” in a relevant policy area, but there may not be the mechanism to bring it forward at the right time. There can be poor communication within the DfE – between researchers who are interested to look at evidence and those tasked with creating policy, without necessarily considering the available evidence. It was said that policymakers can create barriers between themselves and the research, as if they felt threatened by it.

From an outsider’s perspective, it seems that there is not only high-level politics at the ministerial level, but also micro-politics at the operational level. People involved in research have very different positions. There is a lack of consistency and “people tend to flip around across different areas”.

A good example of how to use research was around the 14 to 19 education work. There was a large body of research work, it was well funded and it used internal and external researchers. However, it still came to end overnight with a change of government.

1.4 Poor process in the DfE

There are opportunities within the DfE to use research well, but it requires individuals to be entrepreneurial. The institutional incentives are quite weak, and individuals are always subject to budget pressure. There are no systematic ways of thinking about how to ask the right type of questions, what research can tell you and what it can’t. As a result, a Civil Servant will often go to see ministers and say “we can’t answer that type of question”. Neither does the DfE employ systematic evaluation of previous policies to inform their opinion on new policies. Time and time again, policies are rolled out when evaluations haven’t been completed.

1.5 Shortcomings on the supply side

The supply side of research was covered in the pre-circulated edpol paper on “England’s Education Research Funding for 2018/19” and summarised at the start of the roundtable. The paper concluded that education research, taken as a whole, is:

- Institutionally fragmented
- Typically atomised and disconnected
- Difficult to access and navigate
- Of widely varying quality

There was no fundamental disagreement with these conclusions, either in feedback received before the meeting or contributions during the roundtable. In the discussion, comments were made by providers and funders of research that “everything is very fragmented”; “there is huge variation in quality”; “quality is a worry” and “we do need to improved quality, accessibility and communication”.

2. “The Divide” and efforts to close it

Not surprisingly, given the dysfunctional system (also, see edpol Whitehall Reform submission), there is often a divide between the would-be-users of research and evidence (often called the demand side) and the providers of research (often called the supply side). This divide has several dimensions: a mismatch of expectation; a cultural separation and an imbalance in the areas of research undertaken.

2.1 Mismatch in expectation

The varying expectations on the role of research were illustrated at the roundtable. After the meeting, they were expanded on by an attendee, with this example:

Questions that Ministers or policy makers are typically interested in are things like:	In response, the typical pattern of a research report is:
A relatively broad question e.g. “how can you improve the accountability system?”	There are lots of issues in this general area – we’re looking at this small/niche part
Do we know what works?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Here’s what we can’t tell you • Here’s our methodology
Can we do this across the whole system?	Here is the thing we have found
How quickly can we make some changes for the better?	Please don’t generalise or assume this will work elsewhere, as we can’t guarantee it
How much will the initiative cost?	Here is all the further research that should be done on this topic

The edpol paper breaks down nearly £100 million of education research and clearly shows distinct approaches, depending on the funder, the commission, and the research body. However, the mismatch in expectation vis-à-vis what should be delivered seems to exist in most areas of research work (other than those where specific commissioning is involved).

2.2 Efforts to close “The Divide”

Several people referred to previous efforts to close the divide between the demand side and the supply side, emphasising that this has existed for many years and that past failure should be examined. One person noted specific efforts that have been made in the DfE, but all of these had failed:

- There have been numerous attempts, including training, to get ministers and policymakers to make better use of research
- There have been attempts to get research annexes with every policy proposal
- Research centres have been set up by the DfE – they were ditched because “they weren’t generating the evidence ministers wanted”
- There was an attempt to itemise all available research but this wasn’t subsequently used
- The Department has probably around 200 analysts. They are responsible for undertaking analysis and engaging with external research, but the system doesn’t seem to work effectively *(NB there has been subsequent push back on this statement with a belief that numbers are smaller and many are engaged in data collection and publication, providing the linked data sets that all researchers are using, others will be developing funding models)*

On the academic side there was concern about attempts to make research more coordinated – there would be pushback from academia if its autonomy was at all threatened.

2.3 Cultural divide

Several people referred to a strong cultural divide between academia and government. Researchers and policymakers are involved in very different cultures and often don’t really understand each other. Civil servants tell researchers to “just pick up the phone” if they have something interesting to share – but research organisations do not feel comfortable doing this or struggle to know who the right person is. Academics perceive ministers as remote and don’t know how to get hold of them. The DfE needs to do more to help people understand that it is interested in their research. At the same time, ministers don’t personally know researchers and would not think of contacting someone directly. The DfE contacts are often based on ‘favoured’ or ‘established’ relationships which aren’t open or transparent – so it needs to be aware of the dangers of echo chambers and to ensure new or relevant research is not ignored.

2.4 Research for policy makers versus practitioners

The edpol paper also concluded, that only a very small proportion of England’s education research attempts to address long-term, national policymaking issues. Again, this was not fundamentally questioned before, during or after the meeting, with much of the discussion premised on the basis that the analysis was correct.

The DfE-set research objectives are more focused on policy making, but this is a small proportion of the total research that is going on. The research agenda is an amalgamation of hundreds of small projects, and this doesn’t answer what is needed by policymakers. That said, another contributor did question the distinction, arguing that important research serving practitioners can directly impact national policy and another comment was made that micro policy research can add up to macro policy decision making. This may be a definitional question: the edpol definition of “policy making...at the macro/national level” refers to system change i.e. shifting from the existing paradigm. As noted, there appeared to be broad consensus that far less research addresses these areas. The data certainly supports this position (see edpol Research Funding paper pages 17 to 21).

2.5 Are things improving?

On the supply side there was an assured view that the relevance and “impact” of research was improving, particularly since the last 2014 REF measurement. Available data from edpol* does not support this. A further, more authoritative analysis is due from the British Academy.

It was explained at the roundtable that there has been a swing in the last six years, towards policy-useful research and this will be represented in the current REF cycle analysis. It was argued that the prospect of impact assessment has influenced researchers throughout all of the current REF cycle, as was correct and necessary. The dangers of following the Singapore model were highlighted, where

research is directed into specific areas. As a result, they look to the UK for creativity “and we are good at this and it should be protected”.

[*See edpol research funding paper page 24: An analysis of the titles and abstracts in the BER Journal vis-à-vis the 2018 ARI key words (also see appendices 7 to 8a) shows that the association between research and ARI topics actually falls after the issue of the ARIs. This can only provide a directional impression, but it does suggest that the net effect of the ARIs are minimal or non-existent in academic circles.]

3. Strengths to build on

A robust case was put forward to justify elements of academic research, in particular the infrastructure that supported longitudinal studies and foundations (like the EEF) and independent research that is the seedbed for new creative ideas.

3.1 The need for long-term cohort analysis

It is important to protect long term cohort analysis, the infrastructure and the original research which could alert ministers to areas or issues that require attention. Impact is about policy but also about building a scientific body of knowledge. The social mobility agenda that came out in the mid-2000s was developed from this broader research. There was a gap in knowledge that the long-term cohort analysis work identified. There is a lot of routine data collection within the system that should be protected. (That said, could the National Reference test be improved? It was constrained when it was set up. Better examples can be found in Australia and NAEP in the USA)

The DWP was twice cited as a department that makes better use of research, partly because it is not bedevilled, like education, by a long wait before the effects are visible. That said, one of the smart initiatives at DWP was to create data linkages – through large investment – this has been particularly valuable. The DfE *has* made some investment in data with the National Pupil Database – this is what many researchers in the DfE are working on and is the basis of much of the work that is now done in education research – perhaps this should receive more focus to get up to the DWP level.

3.2 The need for independence and creativity

Arguments were made to support the existing broad and diverse research culture. This can provide high quality research, useful to policymakers. Much influential evidence in policy making did not have its beginnings in research commissioned directly by government. The wellspring has been small-scale grants, doctoral work or university-funded seed-corn projects. This is part of “a vibrant, diverse research culture”, aware of what is happening in schools because of the teacher-training element. This embraces the impact agenda and it is an approach that can help to understand the unpredictable questions. For example, the ability to respond to questions concerning Covid and remote learning were possible because research had been done independently and just needed to be codified.

It was also suggested that greater use of independent funding like the Nuffield Foundation should be used to look at the bigger questions, those that government doesn't cover.

4. Areas for improvement

There were many practical suggestions to make improvements. The three that had most resonance were: to better set the research agenda, to develop relationships between users and providers and to thoroughly improve synthesis.

4.1 Agenda setting by policy makers

While the ESRC emphasised that they looked at the DfE's Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) and that they consulted widely in their 2019 Strategic Plan, it was generally accepted that stronger signals or direction could be given around demand-side needs. The importance of this was highlighted with the comment that we should not underestimate how much central agency drives line agency. If evidence is asked for, then it will have to be provided.

We need more and clearer demand from ministers and the DfE. The Department for Education MO is always short-term. It reacts against those who want to look at longer-term issues. Trying to get policy teams to look at longer-term issues is "like pulling teeth". It is difficult to get them to think about evidence gaps and the evidence they would need, as well as signalling to the wider academic community what was needed.

Other edpol work identifies the high turnover of education ministers (over 100 in 40 years) as well as loss of institutional memory in the DfE. Perhaps with this in mind, one contributor argued the need for an independent advisory research body to set the agenda. DfE has lots of people on independent advisory groups and research bodies. Could there be something about using that body of expertise to advise on a research agenda? A further suggestion was for the Science and Technology Select Committees and the Education Select Committees to come together every few years to create an educational research agenda – one that would help frame a shared agenda that people could work from. We need to identify important topic areas and lock them down one by one.

Thinking about the international research, we must think of a model that can be applied to our country. The difficulty we have here is we are currently extremely fragmented: is our system school-led or is it centralised? We need to generate evidence that can be used in our system.

4.2 Agenda setting for practitioners

A lot more can also be done on the demand side at the practitioner level. There is much more we could do with the use of evidence. This applies to practitioners as much as it does to policymakers. If you intend to intervene within our schools, there must be a strong evidence base behind it. We also need evidence from different social policy areas when we talk about children (and this is also true for the education policy-making agenda). It's not connected enough across government; we need to look at the whole child.

We also need to be building up a teacher appetite for evidence within the profession – this could improve demand and usage. This is happening in any event but there is a powerful convening role to understand what the important questions are, who is lining up the questions, whether there is a role for crowdsourcing from the profession or the broader public?

4.3 Access

Research is diverse and fragmented. How do we access easily what is available? There is a need to understand where the access issues are (the edpol paper highlighted over 1000 different journals being used to publish education research). Partly users don't know how to find what they don't know exists. There is an obvious need to bring research together but who is doing this? There are bodies within UKRI like ADR UK who are pushing forward new ways of working (*NB – but this is bringing data together for research use, rather than bringing together research output*)

For the DfE in particular, with regards to access to research through multiple paywalls, it was suggested they should "just sort that out" so that there is a standard subscription. Keyword searches are also hard: who are the people who work on this subject and are they available to join in a seminar?

4.4 Building relationships

There was agreement that we need “to breach the cultural divides” between users and providers of research. “Relationships grease the wheels of structures” and this is very important. People make it work. The British Academy have looked at this for five years and believe there is a need for a structural change – about the culture, the relationships – bringing together the people from different “nodes of the ecosystem”.

The role of evidence brokers is also important – the hard work to bring evidence to ministers is very important.

Creating forums to enable all this interaction is very important. But note, there is also a challenge for academics: that when they get to know policy makers and they are on the inside, can they criticise government as openly?

4.5 Synthesis

There is no perfect research project that will answer a policy proposal. A lot of studies need sifting, it’s necessary to know which ones have strong evidence and know which ones have weak. Therefore, prior synthesis is necessary to help decision makers navigate and interpret the available evidence. There is a lot of synthesis of evidence for practitioners (EEF; EPPI Centre; Institute for Effective Education; Evidenced Based Education; Research Ed; Impact Ed; Alliance for Useful Evidence) but there is not a synthesis mechanism for policy-making topics. There should be ready-synthesised answers to the predictable questions, the ones that occur and re-occur over time (see edpol Research Funding paper, page 27).

The idea of bringing this altogether and making it accessible by means of synthesis “asks the question: what’s been going on for the last 20 years” – why is this a novel notion? The evidence generators must come forward with an answer to this.

One solution requires lots of PhD researchers (*to be employed by the DfE, academia or elsewhere?*) and trained to do synthesis. These are available (e.g. when they don’t find an academic role), but within the current academic framework, the work is not particularly well-rewarded. Consequently, when calls are put out for this work, the response is poor. Seminars outline the importance of taking on this work, but when it’s put out as a workstream it’s often the one not applied for. There is a gap that needs to be filled and the ESRC has a team working on skills and methods who can look further at this. They are also looking at how to support earlier and mid-career researchers. There are plenty of people out there – the question is how to bring all that together.

An alternative way of developing synthesis is being taken by the Youth Endowment Fund work re. knife crime. Their work is bringing together all the domains for children’s lives like crime, social services, etc. The first analysis is being managed between the private sector Campbell Consulting, working with Cambridge University, to bring together all the evidence. The process is not complicated or expensive, but arguably, it should not be necessary, if evidence providers would create this synthesis themselves.

It was also noted that in some economics departments, reports are already presented with a two page summary, to tell at a glance what the paper’s about. Also, there has been synthesis around certain subjects, bringing together all the analysis around particular areas. There is yet a lot more that can be done in academia.

5. Longer term perspective

The roundtable discussion offered up many practical steps forward. To some minds, these were incremental in nature and will fail as have other initiatives in the past. At the heart of the matter is a

lack of long-term thinking, system failure and an unwillingness to evaluate programmes and to use this to inform future policy making. Perhaps the necessary change requires some level of disruption.

- *We find it very difficult to create any sense of vision or strategy for education, short termism is profound within the system. From the top, it doesn't make the conditions conducive to taking the necessary time.*
- *People have looked at the problems of connecting research and policy in the past. We should look at why this has failed – this has gone on for 20 years and there has not been systemic progress, so we need to think about it more strategically.*
- *This is a conversation that we go round periodically, and we need to take responsibility for this, [i.e. we] the people who have these lead roles.*
- *It's not just about policymakers attending to the evidence... it is that we translate the evidence into implementation strategy.*
- *There is a need for a much stronger evaluation culture in government, with a default assumption that programmes are all evaluated, with the results fed back clearly and candidly to policy makers. It would be good to think that government would commission all these evaluations itself, but it may also be that the research community will need to do some of the heavy lifting here.*
- *Do we need to be evolutionary or do we need to be more revolutionary? How much disruption do we need, to avoid going round again?*

6. Postscript: feedback and qualifications (not otherwise incorporated in report)

Limitations on DfE: *there is a disconnect between the questions policymakers are trying to answer vs. what researchers are exploring (and the different timeframes); there are not enough researchers in government who can translate research into useable information for policy colleagues, or policymakers who are skilled enough customers of it; there are very few institutional incentives to prioritise research (and those against include timing, ministerial appetite, constrained budgets, institutional structures, and the training time and budget to improve the skillsets of policy makers to seek the right data and skillsets of analysts to focus on policy questions) – but there is considerable freedom to prioritise it if you want to.*

DfE inconsistency: *What I observed in my time there was inconsistency. There was no embedded practice of integrating research into policy development, so the outcome in each case depended on initial degree of commitment to the policy, the attitude of individual Ministers and their advisors to research, the time pressure on policy development, the existence of relevant research, access to that research if it existed, and the speed at which relevant research could be synthesised and fed in to policy development at the right time. All these factors varied a great deal.*

Partial evaluation of new policy: *I observed that most policies were indeed evaluated, but that the evaluation often addressed primarily questions about how well the policy was being received, rolled out and carried out in practice. Evaluations of the impact of policies were less common: this requires patience and the passage of time, and often things had moved on by the time results were known.*

DfE improvement: *things were improving prior to Covid. DfE was becoming more open and willing to engage more actively with external stakeholders. They also listened carefully to the evidence around teacher supply in creating the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy – and are currently setting up a new large-scale longitudinal study of teachers to help understand and address longer term issues*

Ministerial awareness of research: well supported ministers shouldn't need to know that much about the research directly – they need to know it's happening and being used, and that the decisions they are asked to make are informed by it, but most ministers don't have the skills themselves to evaluate what research is telling them

Understanding requirements: research should be more user-focussed – if researchers want to influence policy, then we need to be clearer about what policymakers need, and how researchers could best help meet that need.

Quality of research: The REF2014 evidence indicates that the quality of educational research is roughly the same as other social science disciplines; ...All disciplines have research of varying quality by definition.

Benefits of open call funding: The focus on impact brought about by the REF has been responded to in a (mostly) positive way. Paradoxically the most useful research for policy makers often has its origin in blue skies grants by research councils, who routinely find that their highest scoring proposals are NOT in response to specific initiatives but rather to open calls. We need a broad and diverse research culture to provide high quality research useful to policy-makers; the large agencies are highly skilled at 'what works' evaluations but they do not have depth or the passion of the top university departments.

Synthesis: A recommendation for more policy-aimed research synthesis; much research has already been done but it has not been synthesised adequately nor applied to particular policy questions. The EEF provides brilliant syntheses of evidence for practice, but not for policy. We also need to train researchers for this synthesis work

Positive research examples: The Nuffield Early Language intervention. Clearly addressing a policy need. Based on more 'fundamental' educational research – developed into an intervention with Nuffield funding and then a trial funded by EEF to demonstrate effectiveness and now promoted by them (but interestingly it is not clear what route there now is for a wider roll out and funding for this nationally).

Cost of applying for funding: To explore - the cost to those funded of gaining the funding. A guesstimate is that 10-20% of the £90+ million [for research funding] go indirectly goes to the process by which those funded obtain funding – hidden in full economic cost calculations.