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The Education Policy Knowledge Centre,  
Overview

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Education policy making in England requires greater support, to compensate for short-term policy making cycles, the lack of systematic evidence and the persistent failure of institutional memory. The most effective solution is to build a new Education Policy Knowledge Centre, to synthesise and present evidence and knowledge about system-level policy reform, from the UK and the rest of the world. Output would be structured around common education policy questions and would review policy options. Free and continuous access to this up-to-date resource would allow civil servants, advisors and all stakeholders to comment on policy development and respond to decision makers in a timely fashion, so that policy making is better informed and consequences better understood.

The tough policy issues in education invariably relate to curriculum, assessment, accountability, school systems, funding, intervention, disadvantage and teacher professionalism. These “tectonic plates” bear a heavy load. When shifted they can have a profound impact and often create unintended consequences<sup>1</sup>. They also rest upon each other, so that policy movement in one area can easily create system incoherence.

At the same time, policy making cycles are rapid, media scrutiny high and processes are weak. Inside this pressure chamber, ministerial turnover is rapid (over 120 in 40 years)<sup>2</sup>, civil servants change policy area regularly and do not have time to sufficiently consult and consider advice.<sup>3</sup> Important context and evidence is often excluded from the process<sup>4</sup>. Policy quality is inconsistent and policy churn can disrupt the productive routines of schools and colleges. Meanwhile, the most difficult and important policy issues are not properly addressed.

A new “Education Policy Knowledge Centre” would improve the policy making process. A vast amount of learning could be distilled from experience, research and innovation around the world (while being clear about different national contexts). When a minister’s attention turns to a particular policy area, immediately Civil servants, advisors and stakeholders could explain

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<sup>1</sup> See edpol.net; The need for stability: extract presenting problems

<sup>2</sup> See edpol.net; Repetitive reform; Factors driving change (20 Secretaries of State of 104 ministers in 40 years)

<sup>3</sup> See edpol.net and EPI; Roundtable: the need for DfE reform and Curriculum roundtable

<sup>4</sup> See edpol.net; Funding Research: a case for reform and mediation [Funding Research](#)

the pros and cons of different options and the reliability of the attendant evidence and experience.

The Knowledge Centre would be structured around the key policy areas; it would synthesise and mediate available learning (both experimental and empirical), and, critically, consider the interconnection between different policy areas. The Centre should be independent of government, objective by design and rank strength of evidence and clarity of outcomes for each policy option - but it would not lobby for particular policies. The judgement of appointed decision makers and the ultimate primacy of political authority would be respected. Critically, the Knowledge Centre should be free and open to all, to inform general understanding and debate.

The Education Endowment Fund (EEF), the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) and a number of What Works programmes already provide some pointers on the right approach. They synthesise evidence and evaluate the quality of research. They mediate their findings through simple user interfaces. However, the EEF in education, is focused on advice to practitioners and does not investigate many of the macro-policy questions highlighted above. Their focus on randomised control trials does not lend itself to system level policy questions where this kind of analysis is rarely possible. However, applying the principles of EEF and YEF to education would extend “what works” for practitioners to “what’s possible” for policy making.

The Knowledge Centre could be entirely based around a new institution. Alternatively, it could be a collaboration between a founding institution, along with respected research organisations such as EEF, NFER, EPI, the ESRC and leading universities. The founding institution would uphold the Centre’s terms of reference and *modus operandi*, organise work between collaborating institutions and maintain standards for synthesis and evidence assessment. It would provide a single, on-line user interface, so that all policy knowledge is easily accessible. The multi-centred organisation would avoid supplier capture and the quasi-competitive dynamic can be used to ensure objectivity and the highest standards across all participating organisations. Like the Kings Fund in health, it should be sufficiently stable to build up policy expertise and institutional memory.

The first ten years of the centre should be funded by education charities and private benefactors, to ensure the centre’s independence. The steps to developing the centre can take place in several stages:

- a) Research on comparable institutions around the world
- b) A pilot in a particular policy area
- c) Design, funding and roll-out of the full initiative

[Following positive feedback in the November roundtables, there are now the next steps]

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