

Australian Association for Research in Education

Annual Conference

Research in Education : Does it count? Making sure educational research counts - Strategies for increasing the relevance, value and take up of educational research outcomes

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Abstract:

Educational researchers are encouraged to design their research to address significant issues or questions in education that will benefit students, teachers, schools colleges, and others involved in educational practice or policy. Methodologies are chosen to match the requirements of the research problem. Conduct of research is tightly controlled within the chosen research paradigm.

However, little consideration is usually given to the development of a strategy that will enhance the relevance and application of research outcomes prior to, during and after research. The author describes techniques and a strategy that will ensure:

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generation of a climate of acceptance and enthusiasm for the research;

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the active involvement of persons and/or organisations who may apply or use research outcomes;

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interactive tailoring of the research design both before and during the research to enhance its acceptability and relevance; and

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promotion of the research aims and outcomes.

The author draws upon techniques he is using in his postgraduate research work on the way workplace communities transfer learning to new situations and change. The paper includes a case study of the techniques he has used and intends to use to ensure that his research outcomes will have maximum impact on VET in Australia.

Introduction

The theme of this Conference is "Research in Education : Does it count?". This is a topic that has exercised the minds of many researchers and critics of the educational research process (Bracey, 1998; Dunn et al, 1990; Eisner, 1984; Hager et al, 1992; Kaestle, 1993; Keeves, 1990; McGaw, 1996; Morris and Spark, 1997; Passow, 1990; Sroufe, 1997; Whitehead, 1993; and Wilson, 1998).

The concern lies in the fact that researchers can tend to become too narrowly focussed on the methodological rigour and academic thoroughness of their research and overly preoccupied with the reactions and criticism of the local and international academic communities. This narrow focus and the preoccupation with opinions of academic peers is often to the detriment of the involvement and engagement of the wider community for whose benefit the research is, or should be aimed. I do not mean to undervalue the importance and need for academic rigour or the critical role of communities of scholars. The issue is rather to do with the incompleteness of this approach, if the research is to have some impact beyond the academic community.

The commentators and critics cited above draw attention to the need of researchers to look beyond the limited boundaries of the academic world. They urge researchers to actively engage the community that has a potential interest in implementing and applying the findings and recommendations of the research -- what I have termed the "community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers". They also suggest that researchers need to recognise that research activities must extend beyond just the planning, conduct and reporting of research. They need to follow up with activities aimed at assisting the various members of this community to take up and apply the research findings within their particular educational contexts.

In essence, they argue that researchers should not just complete research and wait for its brilliance to diffuse through to the potential users. Rather, they need to pro-actively involve the practitioners, administrators and policy makers during the research project itself and then to follow through to ensure that the research findings are known, appreciated and adopted. Given their various perspectives I believe we shouldn't be asking the question "Does educational research count?". Instead, I believe that we must act positively to make sure that "educational research does count!"

In this paper, I examine the issues involved in making educational research count. In particular I propose strategies that can be adopted by researchers to enhance the take up and implementation of research findings and recommendations by the members of the "community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers". I look at various approaches recommended by a number of commentators and academics for the dissemination of research. I note that the consistent theme promoted by these commentators and academics is that researchers should pro-actively facilitate the dissemination process, as well as the enlightenment of the practitioners, administrators and policy makers. The commentators and academics also argue that, if the recommended outcomes are to be achieved in practice, researchers must actively market the utilisation of the research findings and their application by practitioners.

In the final part of the paper, I describe the various communities of engagement of a researcher in carrying out a research project and the benefits of a more active involvement of the "community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers". I also describe the strategy that I am following in my own postgraduate research work to hopefully enhance the take up of the research findings by policy makers, administrators and training practitioners in both education and industry. I am currently completing my fieldwork for a research project on "The way workplace communities transfer learning to new situations and change" (Rumsey,

1997). I suggest that the approach I propose to adopt for my research may be of benefit to other researchers also seeking to make sure that their research "counts".

Problems in the link between research and policy/practice in education

The poor take up of research by policymakers and practitioners in education in Australia has been clearly identified by McGaw (1996). In his comments on the findings of reviews of educational research in Australia, McGaw notes that while educational research in Australia is seen to have many strengths, there are a number of significant issues of concern:

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the links between research and policy and practice are weak; and

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a perception amongst educational most practitioners and policy makers that educational research is largely irrelevant to practice. This perception has influenced a decline in support from governments for educational research;

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the educational research community is seen to be too fragmented across associations and higher education institutions with only a limited amount of cross communication and networking; and

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in vocational education, in particular, there is a dearth of worthwhile general or basic research and there tends to be a lack of any effective critique of training programs or policies.

McGaw suggests that practitioners and educational administrators in both schools and vocational education should be involved more as "sponsors" of research activities. He points out that such involvement leads to ownership of outcomes and a more receptive climate for the take up of research outcomes.

These concerns are echoed in the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom.

Scroufe (1997) in the U.S. provides a detailed description of why it is perceived that "..... educational research does not provide critical, trustworthy, policy-relevant information about problems of compelling interest to the general public." He suggests that there needs to be a greater involvement of policymakers and practitioners in the planning, conduct, dissemination and implementation of educational research. He recommends the adoption of planning approaches that will yield more synthesis and convergence of educational research without compromising traditional values such as:

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independence;

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the cumulative nature of research; and

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the importance of shaping questions as well as answers.

He proposes the adoption of a range of cooperative strategies at the national, institutional and local researcher level. These include the more use of consensus panels; evaluations and synthesis of research activities; briefing papers; rapid response mechanisms; strategic approaches to dissemination and the media; and greater inclusion of practitioners and policy makers in the planning and targeting of research activities and programs.

Slavin (1994) discusses issues involved in the implementation of "Success for All", a U.S. program, based on research, aimed at ensuring the educational success of disadvantaged children. He notes that research findings and resultant innovations do not readily diffuse to school administrators and practitioners unless a well-developed strategy is established for the dissemination of the research/innovations. This strategy must include the active involvement of practitioners in both the consideration of their merits and the development of the approach to be used in their implementation. In particular, Slavin states: "... no one can pretend that researchers, developers or government agencies can, by themselves, ensure the success of all students. The enthusiastic and wholehearted commitment of school staffs and district administrators is essential".

Eisner (1984) in a study carried out in the U.S. in the 1980's, notes that not only do educational practitioners and policy makers not take up educational research findings, but even University faculties themselves can offer few examples of situations where they have implemented the research findings of their own academic communities.

Eisner makes an observation repeated in many more recent papers and publications that, more often than not, research appears to be following an 'innovation in practice' rather than creating it (i.e. analyses and critiques of something that is already happening rather than basic research that leads to a new innovation). He suggests that innovations, in contrast, are most often perceived as being spontaneous achievement of practitioners.

Eisner is critical of the overemphasis on theoretical models and frameworks, arguing that, in the minds of practitioners, these are perceived as unhelpful because they are seen as filtering and distorting perceptions of practical educational issues.

Eisner suggests the need for stronger links between research and the life world of practitioners. He suggests the use of more qualitative research methods and the adoption of more descriptive and practitioner-friendly language in presenting research outcomes and their implications for educational practice. He advocates a wider use of the first person in research literature so that "practitioner readers" feel more engaged by the authors of both the research literature and associated policy material.

Whitehead (1993) analyses the poor take up of new curriculum in schools in the United Kingdom. He attributes the major reason for this to the lack of an effective dissemination strategy that actively involves school administrators and practitioners. He notes that, while considerable resources are committed to research and development on new curriculum for schools, very few resources are available for the dissemination/ implementation of the outcomes.

He suggests that a major contributing factor to the lack of adoption of the curriculum innovations is the absence of sufficient "after-care" or "after sales service" for teachers and

administrators charged with the responsibility to implement them. He observes that teachers invariably have limited time to devote to the implementation of the innovations and generally have insufficient and inadequate understanding of them. He suggests that, at best, the practitioners may perceive the innovations as irrelevant and as a result lack commitment. At worst, they may perceive them as a threat and actively resist them.

Whitehead concludes that all educational research and development should incorporate well-resourced and carefully planned dissemination and implementation strategies.

Approaches to the dissemination and implementation of research

Whitehead (1993) discusses the relative merits and disadvantages of a number of approaches to the dissemination and implementation of research and related policies and innovations. He makes reference to approaches suggested by (1) Rudduck and Kelly; (2) Schon and (3) Havelock.

According to Whitehead's description of the Rudduck and Kelly approach, the effective dissemination/implementation of research/ innovation involves four components:

1.

translocation - allocation and movement of appropriate resources to facilitate implementation;

2.

communication - transmittal of information and understanding about the findings of the research, the proposed innovation and the benefits of the innovation;

3.

animation - arousal of interest amongst practitioners, including appropriate incentives and activities to influence attitudes; and

4.

re-education - development of the knowledge, skill and commitment of the administrators and practitioners who will need to implement the research and innovations.

In the Rudduck and Kelly approach, this occurs in three phases:

1.

receptivity - the period in which the administrators and practitioners are made aware of and are prepared for the innovation;

2.

adoption - the phase when the researchers and policy makers seek to generate interest in, enthusiasm for, and commitment to the application of the research/innovation; and

3.

implementation - the period concerned with the actual application of the research/innovation in practice, as well as its maintenance.

As described by Whitehead, Schon compares three models for the dissemination/implementation before recommending the third. They are (1) the centre-periphery model; (2) the proliferation of centres model; and (3) the periphery-centre model.

The centre-periphery model assumes the existence of an innovation based on research. Dissemination occurs through a centrally managed process of diffusion with information and resources flowing radially from the centre in a hierarchical process. This is seen by Schon as being inefficient and slow and highly dependent on voluntary cooperation.

The proliferation of centres model is a variation of the first with a number of secondary centres to whom responsibility is devolved for dissemination of the innovation to a subset of the periphery. While this is seen as providing some marginal improvement in efficiency, Schon regards this approach as suffering from the same deficiencies as the centre-periphery model.

Schon is reported as supporting the periphery-centre model. This model involves two-way communication between the practitioners/administrators (at the periphery) and the researchers/developers (at the centre). The role of innovator is dispersed and shared between practitioners/administrators and researchers/developers. Communication about the innovation is spread over time and motivation for implementation is achieved by involvement and a sense of ownership.

Whitehead notes that Havelock also nominates three models. They are: (1) the research development and diffusion model; (2) the social interaction model; and (3) the problem solving model. In the Australian context, Hager et al (1992) and Keeves (1990), discuss similar models in papers describing national research and development strategies for both school education and vocational education and training in Australia.

In Havelock's research development and diffusion model (similar to Hager's 'classical linear model') researchers are the active creators of new knowledge and innovations, while practitioners and administrators play a mere passive role in carrying out directives and instructions.

In the social interaction model, information about research/innovations is informally diffused from researchers to practitioners through a series of overlapping social networks.

In the problem-solving model, problems in practical situations are identified and communicated to researchers by practitioners. The researchers assist in finding a solution. The practitioners are likely to adopt the research/outcomes and associated innovations both because of their involvement and their perceived relevance.

Both Havelock and Hager et al point to their preference for the third model, pointing as Schon did to the inefficiencies and slowness of the other more linear models. They also draw attention to the problems created by the inevitable lack of knowledge and commitment amongst practitioners due to their remoteness from the researcher and the research activity. Hager et al note that the bulk of research approaches in vocational education in Australia are consistent with the 'deficient' first model (their classical linear model). They point out that, while there are some examples of approaches consistent with the other models (including the preferred problem solving model), they are very rare.

Hager et al recommend a number of actions which they believe would improve the links between researchers and practitioners and enhance the take up of educational research findings:

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strengthening and encouraging the use of action research approaches;

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further development of research and development networks involving both researchers and practitioners using:

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one-on-one contact;

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joint workshops and seminars;

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talks and presentations;

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joint conferences;

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electronic mail; and

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joint staff development activities.

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a 'brokerage' service where practitioners, researchers and other persons with a query can be told who to contact, what to read, etc.

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development of best practice publications encouraging researcher/practitioner links;

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disseminating research in practitioner/administrator focused publications;

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publication of critical reviews of educational research from a practitioner perspective; and

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a more strategic approach to the dissemination of information to practitioners on educational research outcomes, including journals, clearinghouses and all forms of media.

The theme of the 'importance of involving practitioners in research and its dissemination' is re-iterated in a paper by Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992). The paper describes the difficulties experienced in the implementation of the "Technical and Vocational Education Initiative" (TVEI) in the United Kingdom.

In particular, Bowe et al suggest that readers of research findings and associated policy innovations need to feel they are being invited to have an 'active' role in building upon the research findings by testing and applying them in the practical context. They contrast this to the frequent current one-way narratives in which the 'practitioner reader' plays a 'passive' role and as a result, feels idle and redundant with no other function but to either accept or reject what is proposed.

Bowe et al point out that practitioners do not confront policy/research texts as naive readers. They come with histories, experience, values and purposes of their own. They will have vested interests and will be quite naturally sceptical, fearful and suspicious of innovations and changes and the motives of those proposing them. They suggest that researchers and policy makers need to be close to the practitioners, involving them and gaining some understanding of their backgrounds and feelings. These need to be assessed and considered, not only at the time of dissemination and implementation, but even at the time of planning and conduct of the research.

I note that the consistent view presented by all of these commentators and researchers, is that if 'educational research is to count', deliberate action must be taken to engage policy makers, administrators and practitioners in all stages of research activities. Researchers themselves must also remain engaged beyond just the delivery of the research report. Producing the report is just the beginning of making sure that research will count.

The communities of engagement for making sure educational research counts

In Figure 1, I present my view of the way the various communities of engagement with which a researcher should be actively involved in the conduct of a research project.

The research field community may comprise the persons and organisations with which I must have contact as the researcher in order to carry out my field work. I have included participants, 'gatekeepers', research funding agencies, etc. but the community includes all those I need to engage in the course of conducting my research project. For me, this community is important, because they are witnesses to the actual knowledge generation of the research processes. They are potentially highly-credible advocates of the research and its findings, particularly if some practitioners have been involved in the fieldwork and form part of this community.

In my case, the academic community comprises research supervisors, academic boards and review panels, academic examiners, examiners, other scholars and researchers, journal editors and editorial committees, academic staff and administrators, scholarship committees and research funding agencies. I seek to work cooperatively with my extended "academic community" to ensure the rigour and academic quality of my research methods and reporting.

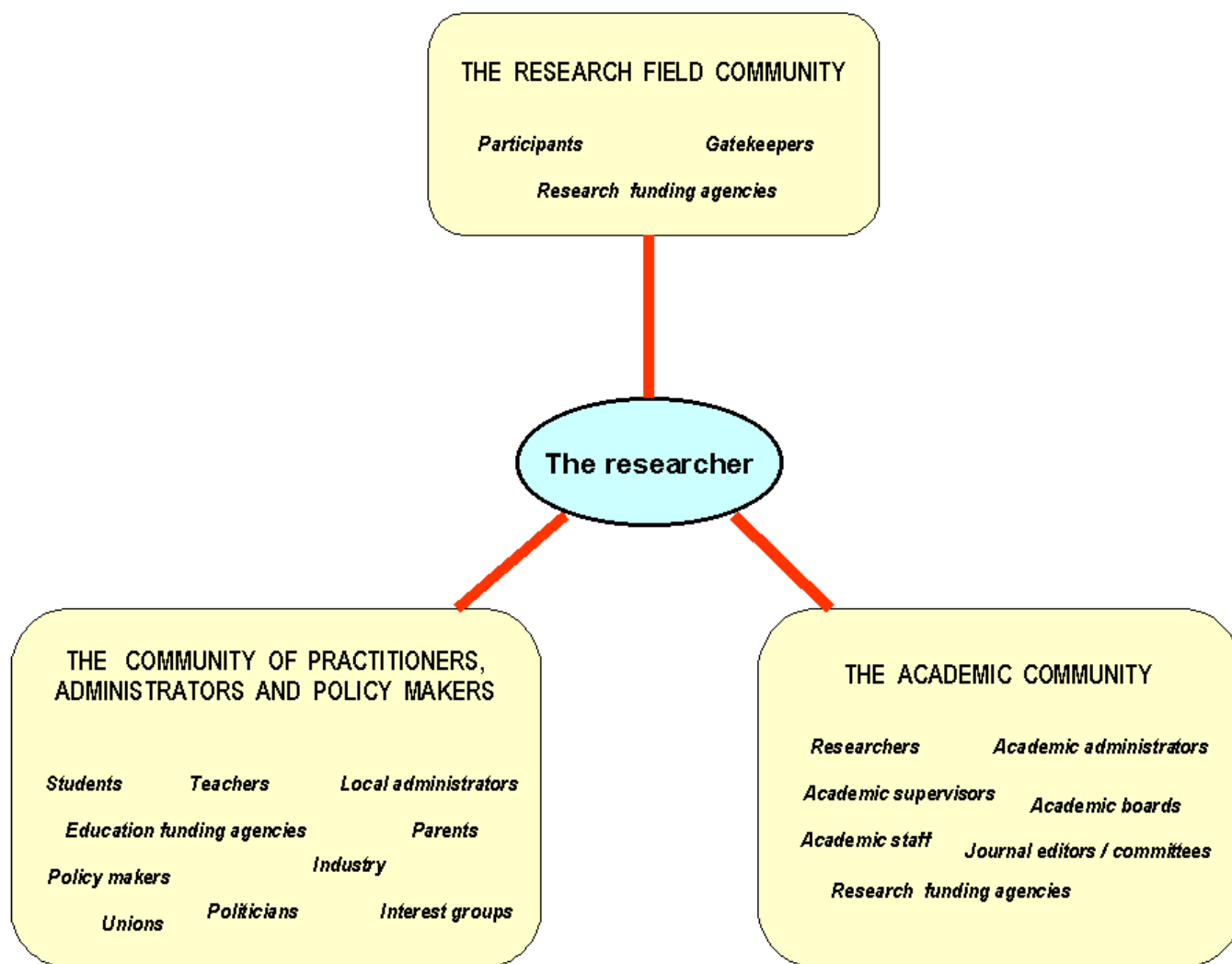


Figure 1 The communities of engagement for making sure research "counts"

The community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers with whom I believe I need to be engaged may include students; teachers/trainers; parents; employers; institutions; educational administrators; educational policy and decision makers; educational funding agencies; politicians; employer and employee associations; industry bodies; and a range of other stakeholders and interest groups with a concern in educational processes and outcomes. The actual scope of a community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers for a given research project will be dependent on the context in which the research findings may be potentially applied.

I am convinced of the importance of actively involving the a community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers in the discourse of educational research My own view is succinctly articulated by Lingard and Blackmore (1997) in their editorial paper on the 'performative' State and the state of educational research:

"..... educational research ought to be 'good, disciplined enquiry able to stand up to scholarly scrutiny, but also focused on research agendas 'socially negotiated between government, policy-makers, practitioners and researchers'."

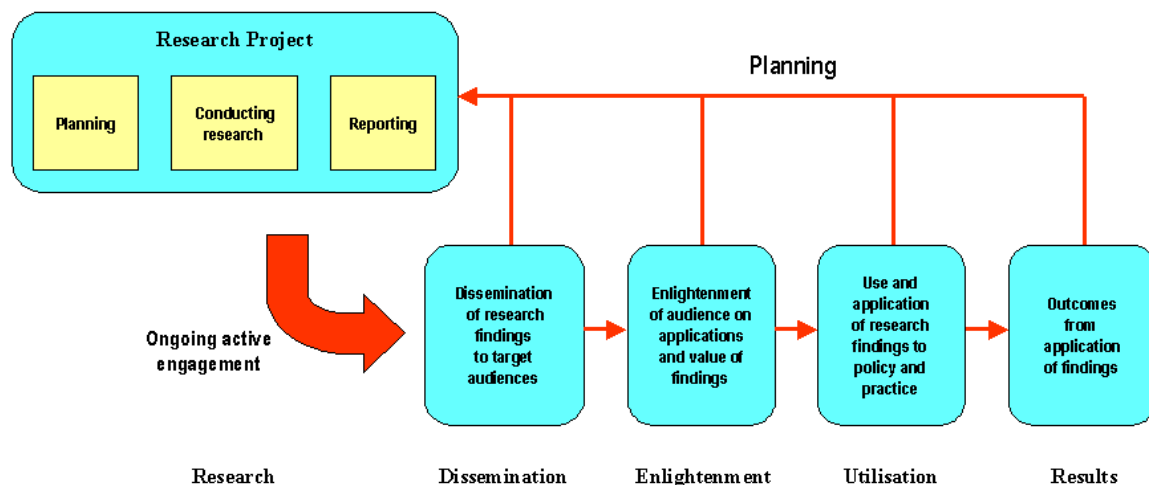
Lingard (1994) also notes the trend towards the alienation of practitioners from discourses of educational research in his essay review of Stephen J. Ball's 'Educational reform: A critical and post-modernist approach'. Lingard emphasises the importance of a more inclusive approach to research:

"His (J.P. Ball's) observation that 'the teacher is increasingly an absent presence in the discourses of education policy, an object rather than a subject of discourse' will ring true to many teachers within the rich countries of the world."

A strategy for making sure educational research counts

Based on my observations on the research literature on how to enhance the take up of educational research, I have adopted a strategy for my own research to strive for a more active involvement with all of the communities of engagement. My overall proposed approach is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2 The proposed stages involved in making sure that research "counts"



In the proposed approach, there are a further four stages beyond the typical stages of the traditional research project: (1) dissemination, (2) enlightenment, (3) utilisation, and (4) production of practical results. The approach is based upon a similar model described by Owen (1993) for ensuring a better take up of the outcomes of evaluative research. Consistent with the conclusions described elsewhere in this paper, the approach involves consideration of these four stages as part of the overall planning of the research. The

approach emphasises the importance of ongoing active engagement of the communities described in Figure 1 in all of the above stages.

Dissemination implies deliberate activities for making stakeholders aware of key aspects of the research. It suggests a pro-active strategy for engaging stakeholders before, during and after research. (This contrasts with the more prevalent approaches which assumes a "natural diffusion" of research findings through social and information networks with the connotation of passive and less interventionalist percolation of the research findings to interested parties.)

Enlightenment implies that the "audience" has obtained a knowledge of the plan and carriage of the research, as well as comprehension of the findings and recommendations of the research (i.e. the "audience" has become aware of the potential or indicated applications and value of the research findings).

Utilisation implies a conscious decision to take up the research findings and recommendations, and to actively apply them to educational policy and/or practice. It goes beyond enlightenment in that the "community of policy makers, administrators and practitioners" has translated knowledge into a commitment and has become convinced of the value of implementing all or some aspects of the findings and recommendations.

Production of practical results implies that not only have policy makers, administrators and practitioners become committed and initiated action to take up the research findings, but that the resultant policy and/or action has been actively pursued and has produced results "that count".

Based on my review of the research literature, I believe that the following principles should underpin the above approach

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the more the researcher consults with the communities of engagement during the planning phase, the more the findings of the research are likely to be used;

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the more the researcher pursues questions of importance to the community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers, the more the findings are likely to be used;

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the more 'proximate' the researcher is to the community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers during the research, the more likely the findings will be used;

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the more the community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers are actively involved in the planning conduct, reporting and dissemination of the research, the more the findings will be used;

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the more interactive the form of reporting, the more the findings will be used;

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the less complex the mix of community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers, the more the findings will be used;

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the more assistance the researcher provides with implementation of the findings, the more the findings will be used;

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any researcher who thinks his or her research study will have an exclusive impact on change in a program or organisation is under a delusion.

Given this approach, the following is a list of specific initiatives I am taking in my own research to make sure it counts:

1.

I am actively involving practitioners and policy makers around Australia in my research by informally and formally making them aware of my research objectives and approach and taking into account their comments and reactions;

2.

I am, and will be, publishing not only in academic journals and presenting papers at academic conferences such as this, but also publishing in journals and publications circulating amongst practitioners and policy makers and speaking at functions and/or seminars targeting practitioners and policy makers;

3.

I have framed and planned the original research around a problem clearly identified by practitioners and administrators in industry and education and I am continuing to fine tune the research direction based on ongoing discussions with practitioners and administrators and careful consideration of the feedback they provide;

4.

I am writing my thesis in the first person narrative with both myself and hypothetical characters as narrators. The hypothetical characters will be anonymous reconstructions of typical subjects and their interpreted circumstances and experiences with change within their workplace community. The language of the discourse will be that of the practitioner.

Using this approach, I hope that my thesis will tell a story with which the community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers will be able to easily relate.

5.

I will seek to market and promote the outcomes of my research to my community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers and will endeavour to actively assist them in

understanding the practical implications of the research findings and how they can be translated into changes in educational practice.

Conclusion

'Making research count' requires ongoing active engagement by researchers with not only field and academic communities but also the relevant community of practitioners, administrators and policy makers.

To have practical impact, research must go beyond just the planning, conduct and reporting of research. It must include the deliberate pursuit by the researcher of the further stages of dissemination, enlightenment, utilisation and production of practical results. This paper proposes an approach and a set of principles by which this might be achieved.

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