

Linking policy and research – a Queensland government initiative

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**Presentation to the AARE Conference 2005
Sydney, NSW**

Abstract

Seeking constructive solutions to the challenges around education policy development and the support of effective practice is the responsibility of state government. The Queensland Department of Education and the Arts (DEA) has recently developed its first *Research Strategy 2005-2007* as one means of addressing some of these challenges.

The DEA strongly values research and recognises the benefits which quality research can deliver to policy, teaching, learning and arts and cultural development. The implementation of evidence-based policies can result in rapid advances in the effectiveness of initiatives. Practitioners and policy makers need to be able to draw on the evidence of research to make informed decisions about policy, programs and projects.

The *Research Strategy 2005-2007* seeks to create a collaborative culture of rigorous inquiry informing evidence-based policy and practice. It is underpinned by seven principles: currency; comprehensiveness; collaboration; culture; communication; capital; and conduct. To implement the strategy, there are three major areas of activity:

1. lead, engage in and access high-quality research
2. embed research in policy and practice
3. build research capacity.

Such an approach by a government department provides a unique potential for academics and policy makers to work together. This paper will introduce the Queensland Department of Education and the Arts *Research Strategy 2005-2007* and its purpose and scope.

Introduction

This paper is being presented by a conference participant who is positioned in the education policy arena rather than the academic educational research arena. But the very fact that I am here representing the Queensland Department of Education and the Arts reflects the value that the Department puts on research and its sincere commitment to bridging what is often called the “research-policy divide”.

This presentation will look at specific aspects of the direction that the Queensland Department of Education and the Arts is taking in the way policy is developed. This direction is reflected in our *Research Strategy 2005-2007* which is the focus of this presentation.

Before discussing the strategy, I will provide some contextual information about education in Queensland and the Department itself.

Context

Queensland is one of the larger states, covering 1.7 million square kilometres. With a rapidly increasing population, and vast distances to cover, there are challenges for the government in service provision.

A key strategic context is the *Queensland The Smart State* initiative. Education is at the heart of the government’s vision for the Smart State, and there is a strong commitment at the highest levels to education as the key lever for the future prosperity of the state. The budget for the Department is 25% of the state’s overall budget – reflecting the size of the enterprise.

The Department of Education and the Arts has responsibilities for:

- government schools
- non-government schools
- the higher education sectors.

The state schooling sector consists of approximately 1,300¹ government schools with around 490,000 students and 35,000 teachers. There are 773 preschools and early education classes, 961 primary schools (Years 1-7), 178 secondary schools and 80 state schools offering primary & secondary (P-10; P-12). Almost one half of government schools and one third of students are in rural and remote areas.

Within the non-state schooling sector are independent schools and Catholic schools. Many but not all of the Catholic schools are part of the Catholic school system. There are 457 non-government schools consisting of 209,420 students and 13,281 teachers. These are primarily funded by the Commonwealth government and through their fees The State government also contributes funds based on a “basket and nexus” arrangement (i.e. a basket of costs for educating students in the government sector and a proportional nexus or proportion of funding provided to the government sector)

The Department faces many challenges in its current practice and policy-making for the future, including:

- Demands of the knowledge economy

¹ 2005 statistics

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- Increasing globalisation
- National and international competition
- Rapid technological advances
- Labour market requirements
- Ageing workforce
- Lifelong learning
- Greater competition for public funds
- Teacher shortages
- Changes to social and family structures
- Global youth mass media culture
- Students disengaging
- Needs of Indigenous and rural and remote communities
- Integrated service delivery across government (e.g. health, family services, economic development)

The Department's current strategies seek to improve:

- skills
- engagement
- retention
- pathways for young people

Strategic Policy and Education Futures Division

The Strategic Policy and Education Futures Division considers the strategic directions of the Department as a whole and of all schools, state and non-state, in Queensland. The Education Futures section has a focus on research. It coordinates the Department's research activity. This involves:

- Coordinating research that involves external collaborators and funding in excess of \$5000
- Developing and informing processes for identifying research priorities
- Maintaining a register of research projects
- Acting as the first point of contact for internal and external stakeholders
- Providing advice and coordinating the submission of research proposals such as ARC Linkage projects
- Sharing research information through the research website, forums and other informal means

This area also facilitates the accessing of external funds to support research of national and state significance by coordinating submissions to MCEETYA and representing the Department with Eidos², creating a Queensland-based capacity for national educational research.

It has responsibility for driving and coordinating the Department's input into whole of government, national and international research activity for example:

- Growing the Smart State: PhD Research Funding Project
- Queensland Young Adults Longitudinal Survey (QYALS)
- Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY)
- Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children (LSAC)

² Eidos is a consortium of universities, government and non-government agencies committed to improving education and social research, policy and practice.

- Programme for International Assessment (PISA)

Research administration is also a major activity including processing applications from external parties seeking to conduct research on Education Queensland sites. From January to August this year, 90 applications to conduct research have been received.

A significant part of the work of the Strategic Policy and Education Futures Division involves futures-oriented research activities. These result in papers/frameworks/strategic policy positions with a strong evidence base to support decision making and long-term strategic policy and planning within the Education Portfolio.

Research Strategy 2005 - 2007

The Department's *Research Strategy 2005 - 2007*, released in 2005, articulates a vision for the role of research in the Department, key result areas where outcomes are to be achieved and the activities that will be undertaken to realise these outcomes.

The strategy defines research as "a form of inquiry seeking evidence to increase knowledge". The term is used inclusively to refer to scholarly, empirical, creative, critical and/or expressive activities that expand, clarify, reorganise, and/or create knowledge. It is recognised that there are many different techniques and methodological approaches, existing and emerging, qualitative and quantitative.

A strong theme in the Department, which the strategy articulates, is around the benefits that quality research can deliver to policy, teaching, learning, arts and cultural development. The strategy highlights that evidence-based policies can result in rapid advances in the effectiveness of initiatives. It promotes a rigorous approach that gathers, critically appraises and uses high quality research evidence to inform policy making and professional practice.

The vision driving the strategy is for "a collaborative culture of rigorous inquiry informing evidence-based policy and practice".

The research strategy seeks to ensure:

- research activities undertaken by the Department are of high quality
- research resources are focused on priority areas of strategic priority
- the research capability of Departmental staff, at all levels is nurtured
- the Department anticipates changes and prepares to meet these challenges
- synergy is maximised and duplication minimised between strategic research partners
- cultural and educational research in Queensland is positioned within a state, national and international context
- a critical body of research in priority areas is built and shared
- policy and practice is informed by research findings
- public funds are used to support innovative activities that are known to work
- the Department maximises its investment in educational and cultural research

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- long-term strategic alliances between higher education institutions, researchers, other research partners and the Department are strengthened.

There are three Key Result Areas and Activities outlined in the strategy:

1. Lead, engage in and access high quality research
2. Embed research in policy and practice
3. Build research capacity

For each of these a number of activities are outlined and key performance indicators listed.

As part of the research strategy, the Department has engaged two Academic Advisors to provide advice: Professor Peter Freebody from the University of Queensland (UQ) and Professor Val Klenowski from James Cook University (JCU). This year, significant changes have been made to the research section of the Department's website including the addition of research summaries, and an on-line research application form will be available from December 2005. In addition, a number of Research Forums have been held, to bring together researchers, policy makers and practitioners to both consider the nature of research and to share specific research findings. More of these forums are planned for 2006.

Conclusion

In seeking to address the challenges facing education today and in the future, the Queensland Department of Education and the Arts is promoting practices which draw on rigorous evidence for decision-making. At all levels within the Department, the vision is for a collaborative culture of rigorous inquiry informing evidence-based policy and practice. The Department's *Research Strategy 2005 – 2007* was released only this year. The journey towards this collaborative culture has commenced and the Department is committed to its realisation.

For further information, see:

<http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/research/>

or contact Sue Howard via email sue.howard@qed.qld.gov.au