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Education research under New Labour – some lessons

Abstract

In this paper I review the experience of the UK educational research community during the ten years since New Labour came to power in 1997. On taking office then Prime Minister Tony Blair famously declared that his top three priorities would be 'education, education, education'. This was set in the context of New Labour's declared commitment to evidence-based policy and practice in education, in line with its 'Third Way' riposte to the conviction politics of the previous government. While this brought significantly increased resources for those engaged in educational research, it also meant much greater pressure to conduct research that was directly relevant to policy. The mantra of 'what works' has also had consequences for the education workforce in encouraging government prescription - something which the more recent, and somewhat paradoxical, emphasis on responsiveness to user perspectives has not reduced. Trends such as these are by no means restricted to the UK, and throughout the paper I highlight parallels with developments elsewhere, the US and Australia being two notable examples. These pressures have been further complicated in the UK by its existing system for determining the distribution of research funding, which has encouraged a focus on meeting traditional social science criteria and the pursuit of 'blue skies' research. In such circumstances, I want to consider what might be the best response from the educational research community and, within this, the role that research associations can serve. While research associations must tackle issues around the research-policy relationship at a national level, they should also recognise the increasingly international implications of national arrangements for the assessment and funding of research. This points to the need for research associations to work together to a much greater extent than before.

Introduction

The focus of my address is the experience of educational research in the UK over the past ten years under the New Labour government. As Director of the Institute of Education in London, one of the largest graduate schools of education in the world, and as immediate past president of the British Educational Research Association, I have been closely involved in the debates on educational research, policy and practice that have been generated by developments under New Labour.

I will show how New Labour’s approach, in the context of then Prime Minister Tony Blair’s top three priorities of ‘education, education, education’, has had mixed implications for educational research to say the least. While the field has benefited from
increased funding, researchers have come under growing pressure to produce policy-relevant research. To date this has been counter-balanced by the way in which research in higher education generally has been assessed and funded through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which has rewarded research that meets traditional social science criteria and therefore provided some continued support for basic research. It is partly on this basis that academics have warmed to this once much maligned exercise. But in line with the government’s wider demand for policy-relevant research, with every successive RAE has come a greater push for recognition of applied and interdisciplinary research and assessment of the impact of research. Thus we are seeing a growing tension between the assessment and funding of research and the concerns of our community to maintain a broad programme of educational research.

At the same time, the government’s parallel emphasis on evidence-based practice in education has had consequences for the schools workforce. There have been numerous critiques of this ‘what works’ approach, particularly with regard to the way in which it has eroded democracy within education, whether in relation to the professional judgement of teachers or the voice of wider stakeholders. This ‘technocratic’ as opposed to ‘democratic control’ of education itself raises questions about how the government has sought to utilise educational research: many of us, I think, would argue for teachers’ need for broader knowledge than ‘what works’. But there is a further emerging dimension to this debate as New Labour has sought to once again transform public sector governance, this time to give a greater voice to public service users, in this case parents and pupils. As I will show, this development in particular highlights the requirement for a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between research, policy and practice – and one that needs to be reflected in quality assessment and funding mechanisms.

In such circumstances, I want to consider what might be the best response from the educational research community in terms of supporting our research field and promoting the appropriate funding and application of our work, and, within this, the role that research associations like BERA and AARE can serve.

Of course, elements of the particular political programme represented by New Labour have by no means been restricted to the UK. And so I will note in passing related developments in other countries, especially Australia, New Zealand and the US.

In terms of the structure of my address, I will expand on the two tensions I have outlined – that between the government’s drive for research that is policy-relevant and other frameworks’ emphasis on traditional social science criteria, and that between the technocratic and democratic control of education. This will be in order to make the case for that more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between educational research, policy and practice and the assessment and funding of that research. This, I will argue, must be underpinned by a relatively broad understanding of policy-relevance in research as well as the continued support of basic research. In the final section of my address I will look at the role of the national research associations in representing our community to this end and the growing need for those associations to work together on shared concerns.
New Labour and evidence-based policy

Tony Blair’s New Labour government came to power in 1997 claiming to herald a new approach to government, that of the ‘third way’. Billed as a creative partnership between neo-liberal capitalism and social democracy (Lawton 2005: 151), the particular version of the third way promoted by New Labour and Blair personally stressed the need for a pragmatic approach and the desire to shape policy and practice in line with ‘what works’.

Although use of the term ‘third way’ has largely disappeared, the proclaimed emphasis on evidence-based policy has been a constant under New Labour. One manifestation of this approach is the Policy Hub (www.policyhub.gov.uk), a website hosted by the Cabinet Office, which aims to improve policy making and delivery across government. This has been accompanied by a number of reports from the Cabinet Office’s Performance and Information Unit about joining-up and ‘wiring-up’ policy making (e.g. PIU 2001).

As I have indicated elsewhere (Whitty 2006) there are serious questions as to whether the government has been successful in its professed aim to deliver evidence-based policy. As one national press commentary on New Labour’s record on education noted earlier this month:

> It is ironic to reflect that, 10 years after coming into office and promising to govern on the basis of ‘what works’, the government should still have so little idea of what really does (Russell 2007).

But my focus here is not on whether New Labour has consistently based its policies on research evidence (something which I covered in my BERA presidential address – Whitty 2006), but the way in which developments stemming from the proclaimed concern with evidence-based policy have impacted on the educational research community.

Critiques of educational research

Despite New Labour’s rhetoric, its relationship with the research community has not been entirely harmonious, especially in the area of education. In fact relations between government and educational researchers seemed to hit an all time low in the late 1990s following the publication of a series of critical reviews of research in education. These were mainly for the national research councils, but generated a number of further studies after New Labour took up office, including reports by James Tooley (1998) for the national schools inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), and by Hillage et al (1998) for the education department itself.

Together, these reports suggested that UK research in education was of poor quality, being characterised by:

- a lack of rigour
- theoretical incoherence
- ideological bias
- an absence of cumulative research findings.
They also suggested that UK research in education offered poor cost effectiveness specifically in terms of:

- being irrelevant to schools
- lacking the involvement of teachers
- being inaccessible and poorly disseminated.

These reviews stood in contrast to your three Commonwealth reports on educational research undertaken at around this time (McGaw et al 1992, McGaw 1997, DETYA 2000), which painted a rather more favourable picture of the relationship between Australian educational research and policy (cit in Wilson and Loble 2006). Even so, in his 2005 AARE president’s address, Trevor Gale noted the exclusion of faculties of education from recent high profile government research projects in education, including the benchmarking of Australian primary school curricula and the construction of teaching and leadership standards for the school workforce (Gale 2005). So our experience may not now be so far apart.

Within the UK context, successive Secretaries of State for Education homed in on educational research, throwing down the gauntlet to researchers to contribute more directly and ‘productively’ to policy making. David Blunkett, the first of many Secretaries of State for Education under New Labour (we are currently on number six in 10 years), was perhaps most explicit about this, having made a broader call for what he termed ‘cynics’ and ‘energy sappers’ within the education sector to move aside (Gardiner 1997. See also Blunkett 2000).

**The response from the field**

The UK educational research community has responded robustly to the criticisms of its work.

One response to the quality criticism is perhaps relatively straightforward. While no-one who regularly reviews papers and research proposals could deny that there is some poor quality research in education, this is equally the case in subjects such as medicine, with which education has been unfavourably compared. We probably do need to work harder in our efforts to ensure that we gain acknowledgment for what the Economic and Social Research Council, no less, regards as our world-class research (see Diamond 2005). But quality is anyway not uni-dimensional.

In terms of relevance, in practice, many of us would probably agree with Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (2003) that ‘...the majority of research in education should be undertaken with a view to improving educational provision’ (632). But this may be in terms of direct relevance to government agendas, or a broader interest in improving provision. Certainly, taking the broader view, the long history of classroom ethnography or action research (Hammersley 1993) actually belies the charge from politicians of our irrelevance to schools and classrooms.
However, many of us would also maintain that there are important reasons why some of our research should be completely uninterested in considerations of use, not least because it is impossible to state with any certainty which research will be useful in the future. But this is also a point of principle: our community conducts a range of valuable work which it would make little sense to judge on its contribution to improving provision or raising standards – our work in the history of education being just one example.

This means that, while some of our work will be aligned in various ways to the government’s agenda and educational provision, some of it will necessarily be regarded by government as irrelevant. Furthermore, some of it may well be seen as oppositional. Such a range of orientations to government policy is entirely appropriate for educational research in a free society.

As I will now discuss, though, these points of principle have come under increasing pressure over the last decade through the influence of funding.

**The influence of funding**

New Labour did at least put its money where its mouth was: in its first three years in government, annual research expenditure in the English education department doubled from £5.4m to over £10.4m (Furlong 2005).

Some of this funding has supported a burgeoning private sector of consultancies and a third sector of ‘think tanks’ and equivalent organisations (Rees and Power 2007: 97). As Lawn and Furlong (2007) found in their review of the social organisation of educational research in England, while there is a complete absence of data on this ‘third sector’, anecdotal evidence would suggest that these organisations are becoming increasingly important as providers of educational research to government. This was certainly reflected in one 2005 press report, which stated:

> If you want to influence Labour’s education policy, you could do worse than target a think tank and a management consultancy. More than London University’s Institute of Education, the teaching unions or even the Labour Party, the Institute for Public Policy Research and McKinsey have the ear of people in high places (Slater 2005: 15).

Nevertheless, a 2002 study estimated that around 90 per cent of UK research in education was at that point still undertaken within university departments of education (OECD/CERI 2002), and we have no reason to believe that that proportion has declined significantly. Indeed, the impact of the injection of government funding on university-based research is clearly reflected in recent research activity.

Several major research programmes and centres have been established, such as the Centre for the Economics of Education and the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning. The major budgets associated with key government programmes have also funded significant research operations, for example the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). In addition, the
education department and its equivalents in the devolved administrations have been involved in the UK-wide, £43m, Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), which is the largest programme of research in education in UK history.

As well as targeted programmes of research there has been an attempt to bring greater coherence to educational research – both in terms of synthesising research that is already available and co-ordinating future projects. This included a five-year programme of systematic reviews of educational research supported by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre – EPPI (see Oakley 2002). As with the other research centres and programmes I have noted here, this work was based at the Institute of Education.

The investment in higher education that such initiatives represent has done much to address the kinds of concerns about quality and cost effectiveness raised in the reviews of UK research in education and voiced by ministers. However, as Gareth Rees and Sally Power (2007) show, it has also had the effect of turning UK educational research into something of a ‘state-funded industry’ (90).

Indeed, while the university sector might be assumed now to be relatively independent of direct state patronage, a closer look at the figures reveals it to be very heavily dependent on it. In 2004/05, total income from externally-funded educational research projects in UK universities was £63 million. Almost 80 per cent of this funding came from state sources, some 66 per cent directly from central and local government departments and health authorities. This contrasts with the situation in social studies, where only 38 per cent of university income from research projects is accounted for by this direct funding from government (Rees and Power 2007: 90).

As I have just indicated, the Institute that I head provides a good example of this trend. Over the last five years the Institute’s turnover has doubled and last year stood at £64m. In the last few years our research income has totalled around £17m per annum. In 2004/05 the proportion of this research income that came from central government departments peaked at 65 per cent; in 2005/06 it still accounted for 54 per cent. 29 per cent came from the research councils and 17 per cent from local government, the European Union and charities. These figures clearly reflect what I have been saying about New Labour’s investment in educational research. But this funding is obviously not infinite and is susceptible to public expenditure cuts and a change of government. Accordingly, one of our central objectives at the Institute is to continue to reduce our exposure to research commissioned by central government to balance that risk.

That is at the institutional level. At a national level we need to be aware of the way in which having the government as the key funder and principal consumer of our research has shaped the work being undertaken in departments of education. While this is not to suggest that the educational research agenda can simply be read off from government priorities, its influence is marked (Rees and Power 2007: 90).
This is problematic in itself. But there is some evidence that the government may on occasion exploit its position as a funder of research. The potential for researchers to find themselves severely constrained by their sponsors is an issue with all contract research (Gray 1998, cit in Gunter and Thomson 2006). Small scale research by Helen Gunter and Pat Thomson (2006) has reported on the concerns of those who have conducted research for key public agencies in education, including the education department. These concerns included the lack of transparency in the commissioning of projects, modifications made to contracts, interference with research instruments and the wording of findings and refusal to publish reports. I can also cite the high profile row in 2005 between the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Ruth Kelly, and Professor Peter Tymms of the University of Durham, whose analysis of the National Curriculum Key Stage 2 performance data seemed to demonstrate that the government’s much proclaimed success in raising standards in primary schools was no such thing (Mansell 2005). This led to Peter’s work being subjected to heavy criticism in responses from the department carried in the national press.

A further important source of funding for research is the research councils, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) being the main council for research in education. While this money ultimately comes from the government’s science vote, the bulk of the ESRC’s funding is distributed as project grants through a competitive system based on peer review. And although research funded by the research councils does not raise the same issues around academic freedom and the conduct of research, it has not escaped the drive for relevance and impact. The pressure for research to have direct relevance to policy has recently been joined by a related call for higher education research across the board to demonstrate economic impact. This stems from the government’s concern to establish whether the £2.8bn of public funding spent on research each year through the research councils is going to good use. The UK Science Minister, Ian Pearson, announced last month that he expected the seven research councils to continue the drive to improve the ‘economic impact’ of the research projects that they fund. In response, Research Councils UK, which covers all the research councils, confirmed that they would increase the level of input to peer review from the users of research, as well as revise the guidance issued to peer reviewers and to academics applying for grants to this end (Gilbert 2007).

**Competing frameworks for assessing quality**

Within this context, the main counter-balance has so far been the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). While it provides a basis for distributing core funding for research to universities, it is (as its name implies) fundamentally a means of assessing research quality. Indeed, the first RAE in 1985/86 had no direct funding consequences at all. Subsequent exercises, which took place in 1989, 1992, 1996 and 2001, did have funding consequences, though the most recent one has had different funding consequences in England, Wales and Scotland.

In England, the RAE certainly plays a significant role in shaping research activity in that a very large proportion of the core research funding allocated to universities by the higher education funding council is determined by the outcomes of this exercise. In 2007/08,
the English funding council will allocate £1.42bn in research funds. Of this, £1.39bn will be determined by the RAE (Hefce 2007a). These funds are allocated with reference to the quality and volume of research activity, and are otherwise known as ‘quality-related’, or QR, funds. In terms of educational research, £26.6m of ‘mainstream’ QR funds will be distributed this year across education departments depending on their QR score. Importantly, this is the one source of research funding that is not tied to specific priorities or projects. A further £8m will be allocated to support education departments’ provision for postgraduate research students and their work with charities, where project funding may not meet full economic costs. But even to be eligible for this additional funding, departments still need to achieve a certain score, which obviously adds to the pressure to perform well in the RAE. These additional funds are only loosely tied to the areas they support.

In order to provide some perspective on RAE funding compared to contract research funding that comes direct from government departments, I will return to the example of the Institute of Education. In 1997, QR funding accounted for half of the Institute’s research income. It currently accounts for around a quarter. That is not to say that the RAE is insignificant to us – it will be worth £7m to us this year, and, of course, may become more significant again if direct central government contract funding recedes.

What is at issue here, however, is what the RAE rewards. Ben Levin (2006) has made the general observation that:

The research practices so often decried in government, such as esoteric language, long time lines, and unwillingness to state conclusions definitively are embedded in the social, organisation and reward structures of academic work (148).

This has certainly been reflected in the RAE to date.

So far, the ranking and funding outcomes of the RAE have depended on judgements of quality made largely by academics. As senior members of the university-based research community, they tend to emphasise the need to contribute to ‘pure’, theoretical knowledge rather than merely to policy makers’ concerns about ‘what works’ (Furlong and Oancea 2006). In this respect the RAE has hitherto often acted as a disincentive to conduct applied and collaborative research as well as interdisciplinary research, which is particularly seen as an approach suited to problem-solving in relation to policy issues (e.g. Gibbons 1998, see also Rowland 2006). It has also appeared relatively unsupportive of practitioner inquiry and partnership between academia and the field. Contributors to a review by Smith and Jesson (2005) of the New Zealand Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) point to these same tensions.

But this is changing in the UK, albeit with significant drag provided by the academic community. In line with the broader drive for increased relevance, a 1998 review of the RAE recommended that research users be represented on the peer review panels. This is something that Rachel Wilson and Leslie Loble (2006) argue for in relation to proposals
for Australia’s equivalent to the RAE, the Research Quality Framework (RQF). The 1998 review also called for new criteria regarding the impact of research on policy and practice so that the quality of research could be demonstrated through its influence on policy makers and practitioners as well as other researchers. So, curriculum, teaching and assessment material could now be recognised where justified by the underlying research (OECD/CERI 2002).

In practice, though, representation of research users on review panels has remained varied. Even where the presence of research users on panels has been strong they have tended to be marginalised and essentially used to legitimate the status quo. This is certainly what seems to have happened on the education panel in 2001. This, in turn, has limited the potential for greater recognition of applied research through the RAE.

One illustration of this is the continued discrepancy in the kinds of research undertaken between education departments that achieve high and low rankings through the RAE. This was shown in Bassey and Constable’s 1997 analysis and more recently by Alis Oancea, whose 2004 analysis found that, overall, lower ranked departments were much more focused on school matters. On this it is difficult to establish cause and effect. But it is possible to see the vicious circle into which departments can fall. Lower ranked departments have limited time and resources for conducting high quality research. Instead, staff in such departments often have to carry out research on the back of other activities, like initial teacher education or continuing professional development, whose funding does not normally include an allocation for research. This has been increasingly so as RAE-derived funding has become concentrated in only 22 of the 100 or so education departments in England and left some areas of the country bereft of such funding. On this matter, Pamela Munn (2007), in her inaugural presidential address to BERA in September, discussed the unfortunate growing separation between initial teacher education provision and highly rated educational research outlets.

The government has, from time to time, shown some interest in developing an additional funding stream for policy- and practice-related research, as has happened in Scotland through the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS). In England, the now discontinued National Education Research Forum (NERF) had plans for a series of Centres for Development and Research in Education, but they never came to fruition. The other approach has been to find ways of incentivising highly rated research departments to change their focus and undertake more work in Pasteur’s quadrant of Stoke’s (1997) model (cit in OECD/CERI 2002):

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<td>Quest for fundamental understanding?</td>
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Of this approach the best example is probably the Teaching and Learning Research Programme. This programme has sought to support research which is both of high quality in social scientific terms and of high relevance in terms of policy and practice (Pollard 2007). In this it combines peer review with a commitment to the application of research findings and, more specifically, to conducting research with the potential to improve outcomes for learners. The programme criteria stipulate that users should be involved in every part of the research process, while applicants for funding are expected to outline their plans for dissemination. As such, TLRP it not dissimilar to New Zealand’s Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI). In the case of TLRP, however, it is still too early to judge the extent to which it has achieved these objectives.

Meanwhile, two official government reports published in 2003, the Roberts report and the Lambert report, were highly critical of the 2001 RAE on the grounds that it had failed to recognise the importance of knowledge transfer between universities and industry or to encourage innovative forms of collaborative university-led research (cit in Furlong and Oancea 2005). Reflecting this, the changes made for the 2008 RAE do represent a much stronger push in the direction of rewarding research on the basis of relevance and impact. Although in the humanities and social sciences peer review has been retained alongside the representation of research users, there are now explicit criteria in each subject to enable the proper assessment of applied, practice-based and interdisciplinary research (www.rae.ac.uk). The education panel criteria include clear reference to the provision of evidence for, and impact on policy makers and practitioners and full recognition of applied and practice-based research which is of direct relevance to the needs of the public and voluntary sectors and commerce and industry (Hefce 2006). As the panel criteria state:

20. The sub-panel will take an interest, as appropriate for the area of research, in the impact and potential impact of an output on policy or practice, as well as in the academic environment, as part of its consideration of the significance of research.

21. The sub-panel will assess curriculum, teaching and assessment materials using the same criteria as applied to other areas of research. Such materials must be published, and it must be made clear...how they embody original research (Hefce 2006: 31).

These changes show the current direction of travel for the RAE. But this 2008 exercise will be the last RAE of its kind. Between 2010 and 2014, the government will introduce a system of metrics to determine the allocation of core research funding, an approach which it believes will constitute a firmer step towards recognising and rewarding research on the basis of its impact. While these metrics will replace the current system for science and technology subjects, the humanities and social sciences will retain a ‘light touch’
process of peer review. However, this itself will give greater weight to quantitative indicators and the clear intention is that the government’s ambitions should not be subverted by the conservatism of academics.

Overall, then, government priorities for research assessment and funding in England seem to me to mirror developments in Australia, where your previous government anyway was explicit about its reasons for introducing a means of assessing and determining the funding of research – to enable government to assess the extent to which its investment in research was ‘paying off’.

However, whether metrics are the way to ensure this is unclear. So far, the UK government has been looking to combine metrics for external research funding and numbers of research students with bibliometric indicators for research quality. However, the focus in bibliometrics on citation indices that use a narrow set of journals may actually reinforce traditional academic quality criteria (UUK 2007. See also Gilbert and Lipsett 2007). This seems to have been recognised in a consultation document issued only last week for the Research Excellence Framework which will replace the RAE. It notes that:

Concern has been expressed that bibliometric approaches do not recognise a clear link between quality and user value, and do not capture the quality of applied research as well as they do for basic research (Hefce 2007b: 13).

It goes on to appeal for help in developing additional quantitative indicators ‘that could help to capture user value or the quality of applied research within the overall assessment and funding framework’.

To that extent, the tension between traditional scientific criteria of quality and relevance to the immediate needs of research users has not been resolved. But that may well be a good thing. We surely need to beware of a swing too far in either direction, so that either applied or basic research is left without sufficient support. While this is partly for the sorts of reasons I discussed earlier, it also concerns the impact of evidence-based education on practitioners and emerging changes in the relationship between public service providers and users that I will now go on to discuss.

**Educational research and educational practice**

The focus on research that has impact is also central to the idea that education should be or become an evidence-based practice and that teaching should be or become an evidence-based profession – an idea that has come to prominence in several countries around the world. In the UK this approach has been exemplified by New Labour’s school improvement approach and, more specifically, by the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in England.

Introduced in 1998, these National Strategies were intended to raise levels of attainment. They have entailed the introduction of more detailed curricula and regular national testing for pupils, coupled with the setting of ambitious standards for pupil attainment and clear
targets for schools to reach. This has been supported by professional development courses for teachers that promote particular teaching approaches – for example, the daily ‘literacy hour’ and whole class teaching. The government has also published model lesson plans for teachers. In 2003, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were subsumed into broader Primary and Secondary Strategies, which also encompass a national approach to the improvement of behaviour and attendance, thereby extending this level of intervention.

There are more marked examples of central prescription and heavy-handed use of research than this – namely developments in the US stemming from the ‘No Child Left Behind’ programme. As Gert Biesta (2007) outlines, although the idea that research in education should be able to tell us ‘what works’ had already been articulated in the US in the 1980s, it was not until the late 1990s that this way of thinking began to shape legislation regulating federal research funding. Particularly since ‘No Child Left Behind’, the ‘gold standard’ of randomised controlled trials seems to have become the prescribed methodology for educational research. Note, for example, the development of the ‘What Works Clearinghouse’, initially a five year $23.4m programme to collate research evidence (see also, Center for Education 2004). The Clearinghouse uses a six-point scale to judge programmes available to schools, such as programmes on dropout prevention. In the process it accepts or rejects prior research on each programme. Five years on, it has rated about 50 products, finding 75 per cent of studies unacceptable, and prompting education pundits to call it the ‘Nothing Works Clearinghouse’. Although there is now some indication that a more encompassing definition of what counts as scientific research in education is emerging (Viadero 2007), the call for causal analysis by means of experimental research in order to find out ‘what works’ remains dominant (Biesta 2007: 3). The UK’s research activity at least remains more eclectic than this.

In response to programmes like the National Strategies and No Child Left Behind commentators have pointed to the way evidence-based education limits the opportunities for – and the capacity of – education practitioners to make judgements that are sensitive to their own settings. These commentators are typically concerned with the kinds of managerial models of teacher professionalism to emerge in recent years and notions of de- or re-professionalisation (Furlong 2005, Hall and Schulz 2003, Tomlinson 2001).

On this basis they argue that teachers’ professional literacy needs to involve more than purely instrumental knowledge and that, therefore, even research centrally concerned with improving practice and supporting teachers, in whatever phase of education, needs to be more diverse in its nature than the rhetoric of ‘what works’ seems to imply. Some research, then, needs to ask different sorts of questions, including why something works and, equally important, why it works in some contexts and not in others. Taking this further, it is appropriate that a research-based profession should be informed by research that questions prevailing assumptions, and considers broader questions like what constitutes socially-just schooling (Gale and Densmore 2003).

**The importance of other stakeholders**

But this leaves us with a more fundamental issue: in restricting the scope of decision making to questions about effectivity and effectiveness, the ‘what works’ approach limits
the opportunities for wider stakeholders’ participation in educational decision making. It is in this respect that the tension between technocratic and democratic control over educational practice is most apparent. As Gert Biesta continues:

Democratic society is precisely one in which the purpose of education is not given but is a constant topic for discussion and deliberation. We must expand our views about the interrelations among research, policy and practice to keep in view education as a thoroughly moral and political practice that requires continuous democratic contestation and deliberation (Biesta 2007: 18).

This is particularly important given the emerging emphasis, at least in the UK, on notions of ‘public value’, entailing greater responsiveness to service users, such as parents and pupils, and, in its most radical form, the co-production of services. If John Benington and Mark Moore (e.g. Benington and Moore - forthcoming) are correct, and we are beginning to see a shift in public service provision away from private value as determined through the marketplace toward public value as determined through political debate and interaction between different groups in society, there is a further reason why the relationship between research, policy and practice must change. Under a system of public value the role of public managers and practitioners at all levels becomes that of helping determine what social outcomes are desirable, what the goals of services should be and how best to provide them, and to do so through continuous deliberation and public engagement. Such a system would be accompanied by more rounded accountability for public service providers to their public and stakeholders rather than only upwards to elected politicians (Horner, Lekhi and Blaug 2007). Indeed, public value challenges the traditional distinction between producers and consumers, contractors and clients, trading at arms length from each other within a competitive marketplace, and instead focuses on the quality of the inter-relationships established (Benington and Moore - forthcoming). In the case of education we can link such frameworks to notions of democratic professionalism, where teachers work in collaboration with a wider range of professional groups, but also with parents, pupils and other stakeholders to shape provision (Sachs 2001, 2003, Whitty 2002). Such a transition means that other ways of shaping policy need to come to the fore.

As such, perhaps the concern of politicians and researchers should no longer be to establish a direct link between policy and research findings or to fund research so much in line with government agendas. Now more than ever we should value broader research that feeds into public debate and the discursive milieux within which decision makers operate. Certainly, attempting to influence public debate rather than seek privileged access to policy would be a more democratic mode of action (MacDonald 1974). Levin’s (1998) notion of ‘policy epidemic’ to refer to cross-national policy sharing and his related thinking on the ‘prevention’ of such epidemics could be a similarly useful idea to apply to education in the context of public value. He suggests, for example, that there may be ways of strengthening the public mind on education to increase ‘resistance’ to superficial but seemingly attractive policies. In this respect, building partnerships among different stakeholders and making use of a range of opportunities to disseminate research findings is particularly crucial.
The arguments put forward by Levin and others stand in any context: if policy makers face a number of different pressures on their policy decisions, seeking a direct and exclusive link between research and policy is naïve. We can, though, see the particular relevance of these arguments to notions of public value and the co-production of services in terms of the much broader dialogue involved.

**The lessons for research associations**

As I hope I have shown: firstly, the encroaching pressure in the UK to conduct research that is directly relevant to policy and practice is having a major effect on the field of educational research, shaping it in new ways, and with the potential to narrow its scope considerably over time; secondly, there has been an equally problematic impact on educational provision, with notions of evidence-based practice or ‘what works’ eroding democracy in education, whether in relation to the teaching profession or wider stakeholders.

So what are the lessons for us? In essence, I would say it means making the case for mechanisms that support a broad church of research in education. If neither basic nor applied research are sufficient in themselves, what is needed? Can we develop more inclusive conceptions of quality? Or do we, at least in the short term, need a variety of funding streams or a variety of different metrics/bibliometrics?

On funding, it may be that the only way of broadening the range and distribution of funded research is to have two separate funding streams – one for applied and practitioner research and one for basic research. It will be interesting to see the evaluation of the aforementioned Applied Educational Research Scheme in Scotland, which represents an example of this approach. Even so, institutions like my own would resist any suggestion that they would have to choose between basic and applied research, so this does not provide a solution in itself to issues of over-concentration and geographical spread.

That leaves us with metrics and bibliometrics. The challenge in the UK for disciplines such as ours, then, is this: if we are not happy with the current citation index, then what sorts of metrics are there, or could there be, that the community would be happy to accept as representing ‘quality’ in our field? Which measures will allow us to assess the quality of research in a way that supports, in the words of Alison Lee in a recent AARE newsletter, the development of ‘a healthy research ecology’, allowing the field to ‘grow and diversify in appropriate directions’ (Lee 2007: 13).

On this, a recent report by Universities UK (UUK), the representative body for universities, on the use of bibliometrics provides some important warnings. For example:

- The Thomson Scientific Information citation index necessarily represents only a proportion of the global literature. This means that they account for only part of the citations to and from the catalogued research articles, which are taken from largely Anglophone/American journals. And coverage is better in science than in engineering – let alone the humanities and social sciences or, indeed, education.
Only 16 per cent of publications from top rated education departments in the UK were published in Thomson journals – in psychology, the percentage was nearer 80 per cent (Rees and Power 2006).

- I have already noted the way in which metrics/bibliometrics may continue to undermine applied and interdisciplinary research, on which the UUK report points to the ‘insensitivity of metric algorithms’ to give adequate support to innovative research reported outside the core disciplines and highly ranked journals (4). In a bibliometrics-based system there is so far no obvious step at which non-academic user evaluation can be applied (31).

- Equally, the report questions whether a short assessment timeframe provides a valid picture of the impact of an individual ‘outlier’ publication, whether the ‘mayfly’ which shows exceptional early impact, or the ‘sleeping beauty’, ignored for years and then found to be of critical value (25).

There are also equal opportunities issues in that metrics are unable to respond to contextual information about individuals (UUK 2007). This is particularly significant in education due to its tendency to recruit researchers relatively late in their career, after considerable time spent in teaching or working in other social science disciplines.

The English funding council still believes it is possible to achieve robust indicators of research excellence which will allow it to fund excellent research ‘in all its forms wherever it is found’, while reducing the administrative burden on institutions, avoiding undesirable behavioural incentives, and promoting equality and diversity. It also believes it can do this while fully reflecting ‘national policy aims for the research base: in particular, promoting excellence and dynamism and encouraging research that benefits the economy and society’ (Hefce 2007b: 5).

Certainly, BERA will wish to keep under constant review the extent to which this balance is achieved and counter any tendency through assessment and/or funding to over-privilege particular elements of this vision. In so far as Hefce’s metrics are intended to benchmark the quality of UK research against international standards, they have the potential to influence other systems, including your own.

Thus, issues such as the ones I have outlined are not just national issues. Jill Blackmore and Jan Wright (2006) note the tendency for policies to rapidly travel when they are seen to provide solutions to governments for common problems – and point to the influence of the UK and New Zealand research assessment systems on the RQF as a key example of this. In a similar vein, researchers in the UK have voiced concerns about the Australian journal banding exercise. The challenge now for both BERA and AARE, and similar organisations worldwide, is to influence proposed quality metrics or to develop and legitimate alternative proposals that we as an international research community can have shared faith in. Over the course of the next year or so therefore perhaps both of our executives should consider how we might work together on such a project.

Metrics, though, are by no means the only challenge we currently face collectively, so our collaboration should not end there. Accordingly, I am delighted that an international
educational research association is now under development. At this year’s AERA conference in Chicago, a meeting of the presidents and chief executives of 18 educational research associations from across Europe, the Asia-Pacific, North and South America and Africa was held to discuss the way forward in building links between us. The meeting agreed a statement to explore future collaboration and established working groups to explore opportunities for exchange and reciprocity through the World Educational Research Association, or WERA. This will be particularly in relation to:

- building capacity and interest in educational research
- strengthening educational research policies
- promoting sound use and application of educational research.

I hope that by sharing information and understanding on developments relating to these core considerations, the WERA can have a significant positive impact on the future development of educational research, not least in the UK.

Summary and concluding comments

In this address I have shown the varied implications of New Labour’s evidence-based policy approach for the educational research community and for education practitioners and related stakeholders. I have also indicated the difficulties in reforming systems for the assessment and funding of research in a way that supports the different strands of educational research across applied and basic research. Particularly in light of the emerging shift away from private value towards public value in the modernisation of the public sector, and the more sophisticated model of research-informed policy that could underlie it, the maintenance of the full range of educational research is paramount.

I believe it is especially important that universities defend an inclusive conception of educational research. Although there are now many other players than higher education in our field, including private consultancies and think tanks, and the extent of the government’s influence on our programme of research is significant, universities in the UK are still well-placed to foster this broad notion of research in education. Even if it does not always seem that way, universities remain relatively free to pursue lines of enquiry that are marginalised in those state agencies that are more thoroughly embedded in an instrumentalist culture.

In the UK we need to address the issues raised by the RAE and now metrics more robustly. The educational research community must engage with the development of assessment systems to ensure that these are as appropriate as they can be for sustaining a research community that can meet a more broadly conceived test of public value than that currently espoused by most governments. Research associations need to play a central role in these and related debates in their respective countries. They also need to recognise the potential for policy sharing between governments and be pro-active in working together to share experience and evidence in order to help shape the environment in which we conduct our research nationally and internationally.
I hope that the newly formed World Educational Research Association will be able to support such collaborative working – to the benefit of educational researchers but, more importantly, to those who seek to use our research and those who we conduct our research with and for.

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