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# Reviewing research in education in Australia and the UK: evaluating the evaluations

Reviewing  
research in  
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423

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**Abstract** In many countries concerns have been expressed about the merits of educational research. This paper reports on the outcomes of a review of reviews of such research in Australia and the UK. Taken at face value, the latest round of reviews are largely critical in the UK (where they have generated much debate) and mainly favourable in Australia (where they have not). In accounting for this difference the paper suggests that it might be explained in part as a function of how the reviews were conducted. In the UK reviews have tended to begin with the research and work forward to practice whereas in Australia they have been inclined to begin with practice and work back to the research. It is suggested that policy makers, practitioners and researchers in Australia and the UK have much to learn from each other's experience, as have those in other countries planning similar reviews.

## Introduction

In March 1979, the first research seminar in educational administration[1] to be held in the UK took place. It was organised by the British Educational Administration Society. George Baron (1979) opened the proceedings with the first, and probably the last, serious attempt comprehensively to review research in educational administration in a single paper. As he wryly observed, "to provide an overview of the whole field is a task which is as impossible to achieve as it is fascinating to engage in" (Baron, 1979, p. 2). Its findings were positive but noted various problems. Some remain relevant[2], including low funding from government and other sources (Baron, 1979, p. 11), a tendency for funding to be overly directed towards projects that throw "light on immediate and urgent problems ..." (Baron, 1979, p. 12), low research capacity (Baron, 1979, p. 12) and tensions between academics and practitioners (Baron, 1979, p. 13) and theory and practice (Baron, 1979, p. 15).

With this in mind, in what follows, we will consider key attempts over the last decade to review research in education in Australia and the UK. We have focused on these two countries mainly because the reviews that have taken place within them represent, in terms of form and outcome, polar extremes. As such, they offer, separately and comparatively, fascinating exemplars of what is possible. Given this, in structuring our review of such reviews we will concentrate upon three main questions. First, what do these reviews tell us about research in education within Australia and the UK? Second, in so far as



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there seem to be significant disparities in the findings of these reviews, how are these to be accounted for? On this, two positions can be advanced. In the first such disparities are to be regarded as genuine and explicable in terms of structural differences between the two countries that shape the way research in education is organised and conducted. In the second, they are to be seen as false and to be accounted for by variations in the approach to reviewing employed. Third, if there are good reasons to believe that the outcomes of such reviews are in important respects a function of the approach that has been used to undertake them, then a number of further questions need to be raised including: Why this should be so? Why one approach rather than another was used in a particularly country and at a given time? What we might learn from all this regarding how such reviews should be undertaken in the future?

### **Reviewing reviews of research in education in the UK**

In recent years in the UK, particularly in England, a series of reviews, few of which have been based upon a substantial evidential base, have been, or have been seen to be, critical of educational research. Three are especially relevant, not least because they were all undertaken under the aegis of agencies involved in the national government of education. The first took the form of an address made in 1996 by David Hargreaves to the Teacher Training Agency (TTA). Hargreaves is an experienced researcher who over many years has held many important posts as an academic, an adviser, and administrator within a variety of educational contexts. What he said appeared to be the outcome of a personal reflection, if a highly informed one, rather than the result of a systematic examination of the literature undertaken specifically for the purpose. In it, he criticised educational research, comparing its "achievements" unfavourably with those of medical research in recent decades, and dismissed much of it as, amongst other things, "second rate" insofar as it was not cumulative and lacked impact (Hargreaves, 1996). This view generated great interest in the media and within political circles and stimulated reviews from other government agencies. Of these, the most important were from James Tooley for the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and Jim Hillage for the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).

Of the two later reviews, Tooley's account was the slighter and has been widely regarded as much the more critical (Tooley and Darby, 1998). It takes the form of a review of the papers (41 in all) published over a two-year period in four elite journals in the field using three criteria of good practice – political impartiality, ideological impartiality and methodological soundness (Tooley and Darby, 1998, p. 6). Drawing on these criteria he found that 26 (or 63 per cent) of the papers were in some way unsatisfactory. Of these, 12 were criticised because of their alleged political and/or ideological partisanship. The report received a hostile reception from the educational research community. Thus, for example, the validity of its methodology has been challenged (Hodgkinson,

1998). But the allegation that has stung the most has been that of partisanship. Those accused of this have contested Tooley's claims themselves (Vulliamy, 1998; Hextall *et al.*, 1998) or have had this done on their behalf by others. Atkinson (1998) offers an interesting case of the latter. She contrasts Tooley's treatment of Paul Connolly (1995) on racism in the primary school "as an example of partisanship in research" (Atkinson, 1998, p. 18) with that of John Wilson (1994) on governing education which is praised as "an example of good practice in non-empirical research". But as she notes, what is puzzling about this is "that *both* authors present clearly partisan interpretations, but . . . Tooley castigates the first while letting the "excesses" of the second go unchallenged" (Atkinson, 1998, p. 18). Tooley, she argues, in conducting this "critique describes the work he is reviewing in anything but neutral terms, and seems to break his own rules in the process" (Atkinson, 1998, p. 18). More generally, Atkinson claims to wish to "add my voice to those already suggesting that not only has James Tooley arrived at some highly questionable answers, but that he may have been asking the wrong questions in the first place" (Atkinson, 1998, p. 19).

The review presented by Hillage and his colleagues is mainly, some believe narrowly (Edwards, 1998; Lomax, 1998), school-based. Although much less dismissive in tone than the Tooley review, it is scarcely less critical in substance. It has evoked a much less hostile response from the educational research community. In part this may be because it did not speculate on the motives of those engaged in educational research. As described by Hillage *et al.* (1998) the "main aim of the study was first to undertake an analysis of the direction, organisation, funding, quality and impact of educational research. . . and then to produce recommendations for the development and pursuit of excellence in research relating to schools" (Hillage *et al.*, 1998, p. 10). It collected evidence from four sources including a literature review, interviews with 40 key stakeholders, a "call for evidence" from a variety of agencies, and focus groups and interviews with 28 teachers and inspectors. From this, the review identified a number of concerns. Some of these concerns focused upon what was seen to be the problem (the "substantive") while others attempted to explain why there was a problem ("the structural").

On the substantive, Hillage *et al.* (1998) noted that among their respondents, policy makers and practitioners alike, there "was widespread concern about the quality of much educational research" (Hillage *et al.*, 1998, p. 10). Its impact was doubted:

... the overall message we found from practitioners is that most educational research does not impinge much on policy or practice, and if it does so, it is likely to be in an ad hoc and individual way . . . While there is influential work taking place and examples of good relationships between research and practice, given the volume of research, we would have expected a greater level of impact (Hillage *et al.*, 1998, p. 11).

In a conclusion resonating strongly with Hargreaves (1996), Hillage *et al.* (1998) argue that policy and practice in education is too little informed by research, and that where research does attempt to tackle issues that are relevant to policy and practice it is often inadequate. This is so insofar as it tends to:

- be small scale and fails to generate findings that are reliable and generalisable;
- be insufficiently based on existing knowledge and therefore capable of advancing understanding;
- be presented in a form or medium which is largely inaccessible to a non-academic audience; and
- lack interpretation for a policy-making or practitioner audience (Hillage *et al.*, 1998, p. 11).

So much for the substantive weaknesses of educational research, what of the structural limitations that, in part, are claimed to account for these?

On this, Hillage *et al.* (1998, p. 10) set out various concerns regarding “the nature of the research process” identified by their respondents. The use of “process” is curious because, in fact, much that is emphasised focuses on the structure of the research community and the environment within which it operates. These concerns include: the fragmented nature of the research community characterised by too many small-scale and semi-detached institutional units; a lack of co-ordination in funding; a lack of involvement of practitioners (most especially teachers) and other stakeholders in the research process; the inhibiting influence of the RAE “which some felt did not sufficiently value engagement with policy makers or practitioners in research content, design, process or dissemination”; the “rampant *ad hocery*” of research dissemination due to a lack of commitment among researchers, funders, policy makers and those acting on behalf of practitioners to the development of a strategy for enabling this; and, finally, and this is implicit in their analysis, the paucity of funding available for research.

This last is not a recent structural feature. Baron (1979) had noted it. This meant that most “published research ... has been the result of individual part-time work by graduate students in teaching or administrative posts or by junior academic staff. Under present conditions, such men and women, although virtually our only source of research expertise, have little prospect of being able to carry out further and more advanced work” (Baron, 1979, p. 12). Baron also claimed that whilst the factors determining the choice of research topics are many and varied government funding has mainly been used to support projects designed to offer specific solutions to immediate problems faced by practitioners and policy makers. Among the challenges that researchers in education have faced since the late eighties, the low per capita resource base allocated to higher education in general and to its research activities in particular has been amongst the most important. Hillage *et al.*

(1998) estimate that at the time of their review only £65 million a year was spent on research (Hillage *et al.*, 1998, p. 10). This might seem adequate but should be put in perspective. As Bassey (1997) points out, this sum amounts to 0.17 per cent of the total education budget – this may seem modest but at between 0.1-0.2 per cent the figure for Scotland (Nisbet, 1995; Kirkwood, 2002) and at some 0.1 per cent that for Wales (Furlong and White, 2002, p. 16) has been even less generous[3]. In some respects, for reasons to be explained later in this paper, things might soon be even worse.

In examining this issue, Hillage *et al.* (1998, p. 10) focus on the need to work smarter in the allocation and employment of available funding (stressing, for example, that this was spread between 100 university departments). They note what is available in total for educational research and how widely this is spread, but have little to say about how adequate it is. The need for more funding does not figure in their proposals for a new strategy. What they recommend has four main elements:

- (1) creating more strategic coherence and partnership;
- (2) improving the capacity of research to provide support to policy makers and education practitioners, through improving quality;
- (3) enhancing the capacity of policy makers and practitioners to receive such support, through improving their involvement in the research process and the development of mediation processes; and
- (4) establishing a commitment to evidence-based policy development and approaches to the delivery of education (Hillage *et al.*, 1998, p. 11).

How have the educational research community and those involved in policy making responded to these critiques and the proposals they contain?

In reflecting on such issues, unlike reactions to Tooley, early responses to Hillage from the educational research community were mostly relatively positive. That this is so can be seen in comments from Pam Lomax (then President of British Educational Research Association (BERA)) and Anne Edwards (the current President). Lomax (1998, p. 14), whilst expressing reservations about aspects of the report, acknowledged that:

BERA recognises the value of an independent body doing this work and is satisfied that the review was rigorous and examined complex issues. Government, funders and researchers are criticised where appropriate; but the Sussex team has tried to be fair and has not blamed researchers for problems not of their making.

Similarly, Edwards (1998, p. 15) describes the report as “a careful attempt at stakeholder evaluation of applied educational research on schools, and the uses made of it”. Even so she is critical of key aspects of the report and its recommendations, notably those concerned with its treatment of “mediation” and especially of “dissemination”. With regard to the latter, Edwards (1998, p. 16) the chapter on this disappointing:

... discussing dissemination and communication in undifferentiated ways, barely questioning naïve assumptions about the roles of researchers as disseminators and communicators and not addressing the paucity of the notion of dissemination as a way of connecting research and practice.

Edwards and Lomax also agree that the emphasis given to both reviews by their sponsoring agencies made them appear to be even more critical than they were.

Edwards (1998) depicts the stance taken by the DfEE and Ofsted as “relativist”. She notes that: “the strongly anti-educational research spin given ... to Tooley’s Report ... by HMCI Woodhead, was taken up by the DfEE ... at the launch of a more considered analysis ... by Jim Hillage and his team ...” (Edwards, 1998, p. 15). Thus a press release from the DfEE “opened with the statement *Too much educational research is of questionable quality and that which is good is often inaccessible to both teachers and policy makers, according to a comprehensive review commissioned by the DfEE*” (Edwards, 1998, p. 15, author’s italics). Lomax (1999), in a presidential address to BERA argued that although Tooley found that “almost without exception, the research reviewed ... was relevant to practice and/or policy”, Woodhead in his “Foreword” to the report concluded: “Much that is published is, on this analysis, at best no more than an irrelevance and distraction” (quoted in Lomax, 1999, p. 9).

In his subsequent *Annual Report* as Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI) (1999, p. 21), Woodhead concluded that:

The agenda is, or ought to be, obvious. We know what constitutes good teaching and we know what needs to be done to tackle weaknesses ... We know, too, a great deal about leadership skills and why it is that our best headteachers are so effective. Why, then, is so much time and energy wasted in research that complicates what ought to be straightforward ... The challenge now is to expose the emptiness of education theorising that obfuscates the classroom realities that really matter ...

The idea that “we”, whoever this might be, have the knowledge that Woodhead claims is controversial. Even Charles Clarke, then Minister for Schools[4], did not seem to share this view. Meeting BERA’s Policy Group he lamented the “widespread ignorance on what works and what doesn’t in education and the lack of an effective data base that could be used to provide answers to questions about schools, teaching and learning” (quoted in Bassey, 1999, p. 1). Revealingly, in his opening gambit, he remarked “I have to tell you that research is my fifth order of priority: you’ve got half an hour” (Bassey, 1999, p. 1).

From his perspective as minister responsible for research Clarke (1998, p. 8) has outlined his “view of the role of educational research, some of the reasons why apparently it has failed to meet expectations and how it might be developed in the future in order to contribute to raising standards”. In line with the DfEE press release noted above, he interprets the findings of Hillage negatively claiming that it demonstrates “research relating to schools is largely

irrelevant and inaccessible, rarely informing policy or practice" (Clarke, 1998, p. 8). Many, Clarke (1998, p. 8) argues, must share the blame and responsibility for "this unhelpful state of affairs... funders, researchers, policy makers, teachers, and publishers/editorial teams" (Clarke, 1998, p. 8).

If this paints a grim view from Westminster, it is matched by a ministerial observation from Edinburgh quoted in a review of educational research in Scotland. In this, Kirkwood (2002, p. 38) refers to "Criticism of educational research quality as 'second rate' by a former education minister, Sam Galbraith (*Scotsman*, 2000, 22 March)". Like Hargreaves, the minister's "background in medical research led him to berate the methods adopted by educational researchers". He threatened to withdraw the funding supporting the core activities of the Scottish Council for Research in Education. Fortunately, this "led to an outcry from educational researchers and the teaching profession" (Kirkwood, 2002, p. 38) and was not implemented. Given this, it is not surprising that recent reviews from John Nisbet (1995) and Margaret Kirkwood (2002) of educational research in Scotland dwell on how stressful an occupation this has become. In explaining this, Nisbet emphasises the importance of structural changes between 1984-1993 that have meant: "Contracts were for shorter periods and the average amount of grant declined... There was greater centralisation of decision making... (As a result) there is little optimism, tasks are burdensome and irreverence is out of fashion. Analysis of this drop in morale suggests competition and stress as major contributory factors" (noted in Kirkwood, 2002, p. 38).

If Kirkwood is correct, these aspects of the system have not improved since 1994. In some respects they are worse: "Competition has intensified as a consequence of the RAE funding model which channels resources to the most successful (in RAE terms) HE departments" (Kirkwood, 2002, p. 38). Comparing RAE 2001 with 1996 reveals three trends in Scotland:

- (1) fewer departments were entered in 2001 compared with 1996;
- (2) the range of ratings awarded has narrowed from 1-5 in 1996 to 3b-4 in 2001; and
- (3) the number of active researchers has almost halved since 1996 (Kirkwood, 2002, p. 38).

For Kirkwood (2002, p. 40):

If this trend continues... it is difficult to see where the next generation of researchers will come from when there are fewer experienced researchers to train and mentor research students and to gain funded project through which they can gain experience. There is a danger that in some areas of specialism the number of active researchers could fall perilously low (a problem identified in the Welsh review).

The "Welsh review" was undertaken by Furlong and White (2001). This was essentially a study of research capacity. It came to a number of conclusions that were echoed by Kirkwood in her Scottish study. These include:

- in comparison with other parts of the UK, RAE results have not been strong;
- despite the substantial number of staff employed in HE schools and departments of education, only about one third are formally designated as “research active”; and
- the number of students currently being prepared at a level appropriate for an ongoing career in educational research, is very small indeed (Furlong and White, 2002, p. 16).

Given this, it is unsurprising that the reviewers conclude: “Overall the most important feature to emerge from the Review is the small size and fragility of the system. Even in areas of comparative research strength, Wales’ research capacity on key topics is limited to one or two people” (Furlong and White, 2002, p. 16). This review has been influential insofar as it may have led the ESRC to fund an important initiative at the University of Cardiff designed to enable improvements in educational research capacity in England and Wales (Gorad, 2001).

If this last initiative is intended to increase research capacity, other policy decisions seem designed to have the opposite effect. In June 2002, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announced that with other UK higher education funding bodies it was to conduct a review of research assessment that would take account of the impact of the 2001 RAE. The review group, led by Sir Gareth Roberts, is to complete its work by March 2003. This and related developments, have led to speculation about what this could mean for educational research. Even before the Roberts review was announced developments were put in place that mean funding for research in education would be redistributed in a way that could have detrimental consequences for research capacity (see Kirkwood above) and also for teacher training and school improvement. Following the outcome of the RAE of 2001, the HEFCE determined that only departments rated 3A (fourth highest on a seven-point scale) or above should be eligible for support. This means 31 departments ceased to receive such funding. The HEFCE then decided that such departments should get no public funding for post-graduate students: even though over 400 are currently registered for research degrees within them (BERA, 2003a, p. 14).

To put this in context, it is necessary to appreciate that there had already been a marked fall in the number of institutions making submissions to the RAE between 1996 (104) and 2001 (80). A drop accompanied by a major reduction in the numbers of staff submitted by departments of education as “research active”. More recently leaks from the Roberts review and elsewhere suggest that this squeeze may not be at an end. *The Independent* (2003), for example, reported that HEFCE funding for departments rated 3A and 4 might soon cease. In a press release BERA (2003b) notes that if these proposals are



implemented and applied to the UK as a whole, HEFCE funding of educational research would be restricted to just 13 departments. All in pre 1992 universities, amongst which there would be only Cardiff in Wales and none in Scotland and Northern Ireland. It would mean 36 departments now receiving funding would cease to do so. A total of 2,039 educational researchers were entered for the RAE in 2001 of which only 603 were located in institutions rated 5 or 5\*. Given this, the implementation of such a policy must have detrimental implications for the number of research active staff in universities departments of education, for the Government's evidence based educational improvement agenda, and for teacher training. This would be "catastrophic for these institutions" and for the "Government's intentions to raise standards in schools" (BERA, 2003b, p. 1). As BERA, commenting on the withdrawal of research support from the departments that have already lost funding, puts it:

... every child in the country deserves to be taught by teachers whose practice is evidence-based and in schools permeated with a research culture. Of the various ways of trying to achieve this the most important is that the training of teachers itself is research-based. In turn this requires the teacher trainers to have a stake in research. And this requires funding (BERA, 2003a, p. 14).

If this is true of 31 departments, how much more so will it be of 67?

From this brief review of reviews of the nature, structure and funding of educational research in the UK it is clear there are similarities and differences between them. By and large, the reviews on Scotland (Nisbet, 1995; Kirkwood, 2002) and Wales (Furlong and White, 2001) are less parsimonious in acknowledging the accomplishments of such research than their English counterparts. Insofar as they do find fault, these focus on those responsible for the system rather than researchers. Substantive differences are, for the most part, explained as a consequence of variations in the terms of reference to which reviewers worked and the dissimilar size of the research communities involved in each of the three review settings. These variations are reflected in the recommendations for improvement to be found in each of the reports discussed above.

In line with the recommendations of the Hillage team, Clarke (1998) took the view that if things were to be improved, four policies would need to be implemented:

- (1) To refocus research funding by the development of a few centres of excellence.
- (2) To increase the funding available to specific kinds of research activity including longitudinal studies, literature reviews, and randomly controlled trials.
- (3) To develop an Information Centre along the lines pioneered by the Cochrane Collaboration set up "to improve both the quality of research in

the medical field and the effectiveness of communication of findings to clinicians” (Clarke, 1998, p. 9).

- (4) To increase user involvement in the selection, commissioning and steering process involved in the funding of research.

In late 1998, the DfEE released a 13-point action plan for the development of educational research (see *Research Intelligence*, 1999, pp. 18-19). Describing how this was to be progressed, Judy Sebba (1999), of its “Standards and Effectiveness Unit”, focused on two aspects of the plan lumping the rest together under the heading “Other developments”.

The first proposal dealt with the urgent need for: “a national forum for educational research to develop a strategic framework which could assist in developing greater coherence, co-ordination and relevance” (Sebba, 1999, p. 19). This National Educational Research Forum (NERF) launched its strategy document at the BERA National Conference in 2001. Reynolds (2001, p. 6), introducing this, stressed: “Our goal is that the strategy should stimulate activity to create the best possible conditions for quality research in education . . . For the strategy to achieve its goal, it needs to be widely owned by as many stakeholders as possible, and must evolve”. The response of the educational research community has varied. Some are enthusiastic (Watson, 2001) others restrained (BERA, 2001; Edwards, 2001) or even sceptical (Ball, 2001; Stronach, 2001). Hodgkinson (2001, p. 21) argues the proposals would “establish a centralised control over educational research that is unprecedented in its scope and power”; they would entail a “fundamental loss of academic freedom” in which “the educational research field would progressively become fossilised . . . [leading] to a decline in the quality of educational research in the UK”.

The second proposal was for an “information unit . . . to co-ordinate and support the collation of educational research . . . a similar structure to the Cochrane Collaboration in medicine” (Sebba, 1999, pp. 18-19). To progress this, the DfES funded The Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) based at the University of London Institute of Education. By August 2002, ten review groups were registered with the Centre, for: assessment and learning; continuing professional development; English teaching; gender and education; inclusive education; modern languages; post-compulsory education; early years; thinking skills; and school leadership. We have elsewhere considered the merits of the review process promoted by the EPPI-Centre (Gunter and Ribbins, 2002; Ribbins and Gunter, 2003). In summary, we agree with Levacic and Glatter (2001, p. 9) that its virtues include an “advocacy of far more replicatory research and of research that builds on previous work [and places a] greater emphasis on [the need for] systematic review” of key aspects of what is known. However, following Hammersley (2001), we would “reclaim the word systematic for (review) activity that extends beyond procedural technique” (Gunter and Ribbins, 2002, p. 395). A focus on the latter, we believe, “privileges the evaluative and instrumental”

(Gunter and Ribbins, 2002, pp. 395-6) against other important forms of knowing (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002; Gunter and Ribbins, 2003). At best such an approach can enable only a partial and inadequate mapping and understanding of the field.

The latest review of the field of educational research in England, carried out by the OECD in May and reported in September 2002, among other things, expresses unqualified enthusiasm for both the developments discussed immediately above (OECD, 2002a). This was the second OECD review of a member country. The first, of New Zealand, concluded that: "in straight volume terms the country cannot claim a strong commitment to educational research" (OECD, 2001, p. 14). The reviewers' general assessment of England is "positive" (OECD, 2002a, p. 28). Both reviews used a five-day visit format. In England the reviewers spent four days in London "interviewing a wide variety of people [62] in government and in groups actively involved in educational research and practice ... The fifth day was spent in Newcastle [visiting] the School of Education and some very impressive classrooms in [two schools]" (OECD, 2002a, p. 6). In preparation the reviewers relied heavily on a *Background Report* produced by the Department of Education and Skills (OECD, 2002a, p. 6).

In their conclusions, the reviewers stress that further progress "will demand major knowledge and cultural changes in the practice of teachers, researchers and policy makers" (OECD, 2002a, p. 28). For researchers this means accepting "that results of the traditional individual university researcher working on a self-defined, small-scale research project is unlikely to influence practice and policy in education" (OECD, 2002a, p. 28). In its place, the OECD team call for "more research that would simultaneously address issues of practice or policy and issues of fundamental knowledge – that is research which falls within Pasteur's quadrant" (OECD, 2002a, p. 25). This, following a typology from Stokes (1997), is research that is "pure" and "use inspired" as opposed to "pure basic" (Bohr's quadrant) or "pure applied" research (Edison's quadrant) (OECD, 2002a, p. 11). The reviewers argue that it is "the relative absence of educational research of this sort in England prior to the late 1990s (that) appears to represent the central criticisms of Hargreaves and Hillage *et al.*" (OECD, 2002a, p. 11). Given this they approve of DfES efforts "to put in place an aggressive strategy to reform research policy and move it towards the kind of research that would fit in Pasteur's quadrant" (OECD, 2002a, p. 11).

For this three steps are identified (OECD, 2002a, p. 29). First, "ensure that the NERF plays an active and productive role in developing research directions that illuminate issues of practice and policy". Second, "continue to work with the HEFCE's RAE to reward university research that fits into Pasteur's Quadrant ...". Third, "continue to give priority to using new research resources for large-scale research endeavours that focus on issues of practice and policy through the development of research centres, large scale research projects and networks of researchers and practitioners that focus on understanding

problems of policy and practice". In line with the assumptions underpinning this strategy they identify two further steps. Fourth, encourage the use of mechanisms enabling greater coherence in the accumulation of knowledge. For this, they "place a high priority on the work of the EPPI Centre" (OECD, 2002a, p. 29). Fifth, increase research capacity amongst researchers, practitioners and policy makers (OECD, 2002a, p. 30). Little advice is offered as to how this is to be achieved among policy makers, but the reviewers stress "programmes promoting capacity building in research for teachers are important and should be further developed, both through pre-service and in-service teacher training ..." (OECD, 2002a, p. 30). Whilst acknowledging that "it is difficult to recruit young talented researchers (they emphasise that) it will be necessary to recruit a large number of new researchers in the coming years ..." (OECD, 2002a, p. 30). Who is to do the training and where it is to take place, given the direction of recent policies on funding, is less clear.

BERA (2003a, p. 14) in a letter to the Secretary of State describes the findings of the report as "gratifying". It then notes that aspects of recent policy, such as the removal of research funding support from university departments, put at risk the development of teaching as a research based profession. In this context, its merits notwithstanding, for reasons that we have begun to identify above and will return to later in this paper, we find it difficult to be gratified by the OECD report. We are attracted by the notion of Pasteur's quadrant as a guiding principal for educational research but believe the review's recommendations have more to do with encouraging a focus on "what works" in policy and practice than with enabling the pursuit of fundamental knowledge. The reviewers seem to take at face value the criticisms of research in education contained in the three reviews discussed above: in particular its lack of cumulative quality, relevance and reliability. They do not consider the possibility that such criticisms might be a function of how the reviews were conducted. They accept the recommendations for change proposed in these reviews and support policies implemented in recent Government reforms rather than examine all this sceptically. In our view, too many of these proposed reforms assume that significant improvement must mean greater centralisation of control in the determination of future research agendas and much greater concentration of research capacity in a much smaller number of increasingly large settings. Before going yet further down such a track, we would wish for satisfactory answers to three main questions. First, what are the potential dangers to a liberal society of increasing levels of central, and possibly governmental, control over research in education? Second, what is the evidence that increasing levels of central control and of concentration of capacity is likely to improve the quality of educational research? Third, what is the evidence that educational research has had so little impact on policy and practice in the past? Aspects of some of these questions have been addressed above, others will be considered below.

The reviews (and proposals) discussed above can be seen as aspects of an on-going debate on the purpose, nature, structure and value of research in and for education. They have provoked many responses from the research community (defenders such as Atkinson, 1998; Ball, 2001 and critics such as Hargreaves, 1999) and elsewhere (Clarke, 1998; HMCI, 1999). Whilst there is no doubting the passion of those who defend educational research there is reason to doubt how effective they have been in persuading detractors and sceptics that they might be mistaken in their criticisms and misguided in their recommendations. For the beleaguered educational research community in the UK it might be a consolation to learn it has not been unique in facing the attacks outlined above. An analogous controversy has been taken place in Australia. But there the terms of the discourse and its outcomes have diverged significantly.

### Reviewing reviews of research in education in Australia

Since the early 1990s various attempts have been sponsored by, amongst others, the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) to review the nature, quality and achievements of research in education in Australia (see McGaw *et al.*, 1992; McGaw, 1997). In 1998, these bodies initiated a further investigation of the impact of educational research and this reported its findings in *The Impact of Educational Research* (DETYA, 2000). It had been initially envisaged that this review would be based upon a single funded study. In the event, as Bates (2002, p. 2) explains, "three reports and a bibliometric analysis were commissioned", each of which was undertaken by a different designated group. The evaluation of the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs of their reports was that they "provide compelling evidence that Australian research is respected internationally and makes a difference in the worlds of schools, and policy development" (DETYA, 2000, p. 4).

If this judgement is very different from the "official view" circulating in the UK during these years, the need for such an investigation was justified in terms that echo the criticisms being voiced there at the time. Thus whilst it was acknowledged that educational research in Australia "was well recognised internationally and of a vigorous and substantially applied nature" (Bates, 2002, p. 1), the reports also noted:

... a tension between educators and researchers, which the authors attributed to different goals. The professional wants new solutions to operational problems while the researcher seeks new knowledge. This argument is crystallised in the claim of the 1992 review that educational administrators and practitioners perceive much of educational research to be irrelevant to their concerns (DETYA, 2000, p. 3).

The report as a whole has a great deal to say that is relevant to the debates on research in education that have been and are taking place in the UK and elsewhere.

In the first report, Holbrook *et al.* (2000) studied faculty documentation and the Australian Education Index (AEI) to count and classify the research undertaken by university staff and graduate students during the period 1927 to 1997. The AEI data found that, contrary to the expectations of sceptics who had assumed much of what had been done was irrelevant and esoteric, much of what had been produced focused on issues to do with teaching and learning. Furthermore, the faculty-based data indicated that links between university and other members of the educational community, far from being infrequent and slight, were frequent and mutually supportive (Holbrook *et al.*, 2000, p. 1). Furthermore, as Bates (2002, p. 5) notes, "stakeholder groups, such as principals, professional associations and system administrators expressed the view educational research had benefited Australian education. There was evidence that key research findings were incorporated into publications intended for schools and of cross-divisional research committees with education departments, secondments of researchers to education departments ... and encouragement of officials and teachers to pursue postgraduate studies". However "there was also evidence that the impact of research was frequently indirect, unstructured and often mediated through individuals". If there is a good deal in this study and its approach that is pertinent to an examination of the merits of educational research in the UK, there is, arguably, even more in the two that follow.

In the second study, Figgis *et al.* (2000, p. 367) reported in *Backtracking Practice and Policies to Research*:

... reversed the usual research to practice investigation, researching backwards from program and policy initiatives towards research that informed them. Intensive interviewing, observation and document analysis focused on four program/policy initiatives: improving literacy; gender equality programs; students at education risk; and the introduction of new information technologies. In each of these areas the researchers discovered connecting webs which linked practitioners and policy makers with research and researchers: real networks forming around real issues.

As a statement of the merits of educational research this represents a view that is far more positive than those all too commonly advanced in the UK.

The third study, *Teacher Knowledge in Action*, by McMeniman *et al.* (1992), employs a method similar to that employed by Figgis *et al.* (2000) and produced findings that are substantially compatible. In this review, the researchers sought to examine the practice of teachers for evidence of the impact of educational research. It concluded:

... formal research is not viewed by [teacher] participants ... as a source far removed from or irrelevant to classroom practice. Indeed it is accessed and viewed as one of many proximal sources of influence along with disseminated research such as professional reading, in-service seminars, formal post-graduate studies, and initial training. Many of the teachers in this study saw research as a relevant, informed and accessible base in which to ground their actions (Figgis *et al.*, 2000, pp. 494-5).

The fourth review, conducted by Phelan *et al.* (2000) took the form of a bibliometric analysis of the publication and citation rates of Australian researchers in international educational journals listed in the ISI index between 1981-1998. *Inter alia*, it offers a useful barometer of the standing of this research internationally. It demonstrated that Australian educational researchers have made a significant contribution on a number of key educational themes and that much of this research has a direct practical application to teaching, to educational administration and to policy development[5].

All these studies were conducted specifically for DETYA review, but the final report included a fifth study conducted by Selby Smith (1999) for the Monash/ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training. Based upon a review of the literature, nine case studies, and feedback on its preliminary findings by ten experts from outside of Australia, it sought to examine the influence of research on decision making in vocational education and training policy formulation. As with the others, the findings of this study are essentially positive. Even so its author warns that, given the complexity of the factors involved, the expectations regarding the influence of research on policy makers in this area should be suitably modest.

In an overview of what these studies taken together can tell us about the impact of educational research, DETYA (2000) claim that they demonstrate:

... the inadequacies of conceiving the relationship between educational research and practice as ... linear ... "Impact" suggests a clear, identifiable, measurable and direct relationship. This research contests such a view. Instead, it presents a multi-layered, unpredictable, interacting process of engagement between the researcher and the educator. This engagement involves both researcher and educator in the creation of "new knowledge" and "new solutions" to challenges. The question of 'impact' then becomes one of effective and responsive linkage at all levels: within the research community, within the professional community, and between these two communities and the individuals within them (quoted in *Research Intelligence*, 2001, p. 23).

Whatever its limitations, for example the lack of reference to a third community, that of policy makers, such a view of "impact" as applied to educational research is a good deal more sophisticated than the simplistic conceptions that have tended to inform recent debates on this theme within the UK.

Although there is much to tell which is positive, we do not claim that this study from Australia suggests that educational research there is unproblematic. On the contrary, all of the reviews express reservations as to its nature, quality, accessibility, impact and the like. However, taken as a whole, they paint a portrait of the health of educational research, and of the relationship between educational researchers and policy makers and practitioners in Australia that is much more positive than recent commentaries suggest is the case in the UK.

This is not to say that these relationships are unproblematic. As Lingard and Blackmore (1997) point out, the emergence of the "performative state" is

having considerable impact on (particularly public) education and on educational research that is increasingly expected to “take” policy defined research agendas rather than “make” research that is critical and evaluative of policy. Moreover, as Lingard (2001) suggests, sources of funding research are now a good deal more restricted and policy-driven than they were in the past. Considine *et al.* (2001) also claim that more recently Australian expenditure on education and educational research has significantly declined in comparison with OECD countries. If this should be the case it would seem that a further decline of funding for educational research from all sources from the already low level of one third of one percent of educational expenditure (McGaw *et al.*, 1992) is a discouraging indicator of future research possibilities.

Nonetheless in terms of policy-related (rather than policy-driven) research Australian researchers continue their interest and influence regarding inequalities (especially with regard to gender, wealth and ethnicity) and policy sociology (Lingard and Blackmore, 1997). Moreover in curriculum areas much work is continuing in the application of theories of learning and development to various curriculum areas. Measurement research with a practical application is well established. These latter areas are relevant to policy and practitioner interests (Lingard and Blackmore, 1997). But perhaps the most outstanding feature of educational research in Australia over the past two decades is the attention paid to practitioner-related research (Lingard and Blackmore, 1997; Kemmis, 2001).

The DETYA (2000) report, *The Impact of Educational Research*, is not, therefore, inconsistent with other significant sources of commentary on the state of educational research in Australia. Indeed, there is a strong impulse within the Australian community of educational researchers to maintain a breadth of research focus in the face of attempts by governments to “instrumentalize” (Ozga, 1999) educational research following the UK model or to imitate the American establishment of the National Research Council (Blackmore, 2002; Lingard, 2001).

Almost certainly this was the model envisaged by the Commonwealth Government in 1998 when it commissioned the *Impact of Educational Research* study. The fact that the report vindicated the relationship between Australian educational research and policy *and* practice may in part explain the apparent difficulties of Government with regard to the report, for there is evidence that politicians in Australia did not quite know what to do with a report bearing mainly good news about educational research. In its edition of July 2001 *Research Intelligence* reprinted a summary of the report and noted that it seems that it “sat in the Minister’s in tray for over a year while the Australian research community fretted as to what it would say” (*Research Intelligence*, 2001, p. 17). Could the tardiness of ministers in part be explained by the possibility they had not expected such a positive outcome and that the ministry was therefore not prepared to cope with it?



But it is not just ministers who have shown a lack of interest in these reviews. A study of relevant websites and media releases by one of the authors turned up very little by way of political response. There has not been a formal launch of the Impact Report. The issue seems to have died politically despite attempts by the Australian Association of Research in Education's (AARE) to encourage debate on the recommendations of the Impact Report. As worryingly, and despite the best efforts of AARE, these reviews have not generated in Australia anything like the same level of response as did their UK equivalents in the UK from the educational researcher community in general and those who work within the field of educational administration in particular. In this context a survey of the volumes of the *Journal of Educational Administration* published between 2000-2002 (Vols 38-40) by another of the authors was unable to find any reference to the review, let alone any paper that dealt with it. However that may be, it is not just Australians who can, and perhaps should, learn from the review. Rather, as *Research Intelligence* concludes it: "contains important messages for educational research throughout the world" (*Research Intelligence*, 2001, p. 17).

### Learning from each other

In evaluating the reviews of educational research discussed above, at least three possible conclusions might be drawn. First that compared with Australia educational research is inferior in the UK. Second that assessed against the latest Australian case the reviews of educational research which have been conducted in recent years in the UK are inferior in depth and quality and, most especially, in approach. Third that, therefore, educational research might not be inferior in the UK but only appears to be so because the ways in which it has been reviewed, unlike those employed in Australia, have tended to ensure this outcome.

Given this, it seems reasonable to hypothesise that were a review of educational research in the UK to be conducted along the lines of the latest Australian reviews it would produce findings that are substantially similar. In support of this view it is worth noting, as noted above, that earlier studies of educational research in Australia, using traditional methods and assumptions (DETYA, 2000; ARC, 1997), have been somewhat less complementary than was this latest review. These studies, like their UK counterparts, typically begin with the research to be considered and then seek to track forward its influence on policy and practice. Unsurprisingly they have tended to produce similar results. From this benchmark, it is possible to explain the Australian experience in more than one way. It could be that a dramatic improvement has taken place in the quality and relevance of educational research between 1997 and 2000. This is possible but unlikely. It could also be that a significant part of the "dramatic improvement" is to be explained as an outcome of the manner in which this has been researched.

With these possibilities in mind, it is necessary to be as clear about the lessons that might be drawn from the latest Australian reviews. Bates (2002, p. 5) identifies five:

Firstly, while the relationships between research and practice are often indirect, they are significant and numerous. Secondly, by using more sophisticated methodologies, which work backward from practice, many of the ways research contributes to practice can be unravelled. Thirdly, the theory to application paradigm fundamental to so much R&D does not figure strongly in these accounts of educational practice. Fourthly, the models of relationship between the teacher/practitioner, administrator and policy maker that emerges from these studies is far from the hierarchical instruction/compliance model that is so much part of a rational policy making/implementation model of education. .But perhaps the most important conclusion is that. .significant. .research is being conducted.

There seems a strong case for a similar review, funded and carried out in much the same way, to be undertaken in the UK[6]. Without this policy decisions on the future of educational research might, ironically, be taken on the basis of evidence that is more limited, more partial and more inadequate than the research some policy makers have sought to criticise.

In this review of reviews of research in education we have argued in favour of the merits of the latest Australian approach as against its UK counterparts. But in key respects, we have reservations about all these reviews. First, given the centrality they all accord to relevance and to what works in determining what is to count as worthwhile they all tend to privilege certain kinds of research. Second, none offer a comprehensive map or maps of the field against which to identify "what research exists, how valid and sound it is and where there may be gaps in our knowledge" (Southworth, 2001, p. 1). On this, our position is that an inclusive map of research in education and educational administration must supplement the instrumental and evaluative with knowledge provinces generated from the conceptual, the humanistic and the critical (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002). Such an approach would have the advantage of enabling the asking of tough questions about the knowledge claims that underpin activity within these fields and of the policies and practices that purport to derive from them (Gunter and Ribbins, 2002, 2003).

In this paper we have reviewed some of the reviews of research in education that have been published over the last twenty years in the UK and Australia. In doing so, we have noted what we see as some of the limitations of these reviews, most especially from the UK. In doing so we have argued the case for an approach informed by the kind of orientation that underpins the most recent of the Australian reviews. This is not to claim that there is nothing to criticise in the Australian case on this or on related matters. Whatever its merits, insofar as it's latest review lacks an explicit, or even an implicit, map of the field it is hard to make informed judgements as to its rigour, openness, comprehensiveness, and transparency. On this, at least, both countries have much to learn.

## Notes

1. We will use "administration" as an inclusive term designed to cover a range of concepts that have been used with more or less discrimination within the field including "management", "policy making" and "leadership" (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002).
2. The place of educational administration in research in education in the UK has risen sharply since 1979. Furlong and White (2002, p. 16) list "organisation" and "policy" amongst the most frequently researched topics in Wales and almost a quarter of the texts submitted to the Education Panel in recent RAEs were from this field. There is evidence of an increase of similar proportions in Australia. In a study of 104 of the most cited articles reporting on research in education, Phelan *et al.* (2000) found that about 25 per cent were on administration.
3. It is hard to be sure how much is spent on educational research. The OECD (2002b, p. 5, italics added) review *Background Report* notes that the NERF using a "combination of income and expenditure sources and *inspired guesswork* ... estimates about £70-75 million per annum ... less than one half of one per cent of the total national expenditure on education". Even this is much higher than the figures quoted above.
4. In 2002 Clarke returned to the Department, this time as Secretary of State.
5. A fuller discussion of Phelan is to be found in Bates (2003).
6. First among her final list of "emerging issues", Kirkwood (2002, p. 40) identifies "the need for a comprehensive review of educational research in Scotland to be undertaken in order to provide accurate information as a basis for formulating effective educational strategies".

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