

**ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme
Research Capacity Building Network**

**The RCBN Consultation Exercise:
Stakeholder Report**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. One of the early objectives of the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) Research Capacity Building Network has been to undertake an extensive consultation exercise in order to identify the priorities for research capacity-building and to generate a database of expertise from across the UK educational research community.
- 1.2. This report provides an account of the first element of the consultation exercise, interviews with twenty-five key stakeholders each representing the major constituencies of the UK education community. In particular, they were asked about the current state of educational research in the UK, why it is like this, and how educational research could continue to move forward.

2. The state of educational research

- 2.1. Many of the stakeholders when asked about the current state of educational research began, without prompting, by referring to and addressing recent high-profile critiques (e.g. Woodhead 1998; Hillage et al 1998; Hargreaves 1997 and 1999; Tooley and Darby 1998).
- 2.2. Published reaction to these commentaries has tended to be defensive of the current state of education the typical response of stakeholders was actually to find some agreement in their criticisms. However, stakeholders did raise doubt around the evidence base of these critiques.
- 2.3. The stakeholders raised concern over the relevance and general usefulness of educational research to practice and policy-making, particularly by those from the policy-making domain. This perhaps conflicted with the HE researchers who believed policy-makers often take a naïve view of the contribution research can make to what becomes 'common knowledge'.
- 2.4. When asked for their views on the current state of educational research, the majority of stakeholders, from all perspectives, expressed concern regarding its general quality. While a few of the stakeholders were keen to show educational research in a positive light or that there is great variety in its quality, the majority of stakeholders tended to emphasise the poor quality of educational research.
- 2.5. This did not mean that they thought all education research is poor. Indeed, from an international perspective UK educational research may be seen as relatively good, although lessons could be learnt from a number of other countries, such as the US and Sweden.
- 2.6. Similarly there was a general view that education research in the UK is getting better, particularly in terms of its standing as an independent research discipline. However, whether this progress has kept up with the pace of progress in other research disciplines is uncertain.

- 2.7. Many stakeholders raised the issue of the relevance of educational research to policy and practice. The general feeling was that this is a system-wide issue and not something that could be addressed solely by the researchers themselves.
- 2.8. As far as the HE researcher stakeholders are concerned they would argue that most educational research is relevant, or that an argument for its relevance could be generated. From discussions with the stakeholders it appears the problem may be in the process of transforming research findings into useful and relevant knowledge.
- 2.9. Given that many of the stakeholders tended to agree, at least in principle, with some of the criticisms of educational, it is perhaps not surprising that they focussed themselves upon the poor quality research that is generated. The perspective offered by the stakeholders was, without being pessimistic, to argue that educational research in the UK needed to, and, incidentally, could, be enhanced.

3. Constraining the capacity for high quality, relevant, educational research

- 3.1. The stakeholders discussed a number of examples and explanations that they believe underlie the issue of quality in educational research. These included structural problems ranging from the organisation and institutional processes of educational research currently in the UK, to the composition of the research community itself.
- 3.2. One constraint on the profile of educational research was the apparent lack of evidence-informed policy-making. Many explanations for this were given, including the suggestion that researchers are not undertaking relevant research, the problem of turning research into a form that policy-makers can react to, and that even when research gets articulated into policy-making circles it can often be ignored. However, with the devolution of government across the UK this latter problem may be improving.
- 3.3. The relationship between research and practice is of equal importance. Again there was concern that practitioners are reluctant to use research in their work, although many stakeholders were aware that they have little capacity to do so.
- 3.4. However, HE researchers were not devoid of responsibility in the way educational research could have greater impact upon policy and practice. Not only was there criticism that researchers were not undertaking research in policy-relevant areas, there was also the suggestion that many HE researchers were not staying abreast of developments in teaching, thereby limiting the relevance of their research to practice.
- 3.5. There was a view that it is difficult for research to be seen to make an impact upon policy and practice, simply because the size of the education system is so large and hence change takes place at an incredibly slow pace.

- 3.6. A number of stakeholders also raised the possibility that the process of commissioning or funding research was also a constraint. Underlying this argument is the view that a competitive research environment is perhaps not conducive to capacity-building since it tends not to be supportive or co-operative. There was acknowledgement that the funding agencies do take a 'developmental' role, but that this was limited.
- 3.7. Similarly, the use of peer-review in the funding process was seen as a generating a particular tension, again, not conducive to capacity-building. Although there were no suggestions how the peer-review system could be changed a number of stakeholders suggested that at the core of the peer-review problem was the culture of educational research.
- 3.8. Many stakeholders discussed problems with the educational research culture in methodological terms, highlighting the naïve approach that many researchers take to research. The issue of the 'naïve' educational researcher is closely related to methodological problems and limitations, and it is the use of methods and methodologies that dominated conversations with the majority of stakeholders.
- 3.9. The shortage of 'quantitative' research in education, and the social sciences more generally, has been given a very high profile in recent years. However, the stakeholders interviewed for this consultation exercise were very aware that this was only one feature of the methodological limitations to educational research.
- 3.10. One methodological limitation was the propensity for research projects to be 'non-cumulative', 'small-scale', and 'flawed'. This raises the question as to whether such research can identify causal links in social phenomenon. The argument given is that often the researchers do not have the skills to undertake the type of research that will actually address their research question or problem. A number of stakeholders argued that research too frequently ignores the issue of causality, or do not set out to fully test their assertions in a satisfactorily 'scientific' or 'logical' fashion.
- 3.11. Another common criticism of research is when the conclusions bear no relationship to the evidence presented. In particular, the stakeholders believed that research over-generalised, largely because the majority of educational research is considered as small-scale.
- 3.12. Nearly every stakeholder reported that there was a lack of quantitative research and that this has straightforward consequences in the quality and relevance of research. One consequence of this shortage is that there are simply too few researchers to pass such skills on to their peers or the next generation of researchers.
- 3.13. The relative shortage of quantitative research was also associated with the limited use of large-scale datasets in educational research. The application of such data to educational research is so limited that there are too few examples of its potential.

- 3.14. The perceived relative absence of quantitative research need not detract from the development of sophisticated quantitative techniques, particularly developments in the use of multi-level modelling and the analysis of complex datasets. But there was a great fear that even though such developments were being made there were too few researchers who could actually use these techniques.
- 3.15. There was also the concern that the requirements of these sophisticated techniques meant that they had become overly technical and far removed from most researchers' minds. This would suggest that the situation is not just one of a shortage of quantitative research, but simply a shortage of quantitative research skills, required to be able to understand, and critically review, quantitative research.
- 3.16. There was also a consensus amongst stakeholders that 'qualitative' research, although in a healthier state than 'quantitative' research, has its own limitations. Stakeholders highlighted the point that many researchers employ qualitative methods with little training in these methods and without a critical awareness of qualitative techniques. Consequently, there was a view that qualitative research tends to lack rigour in its analysis. Another key criticism of educational research was the lack of innovation in qualitative methods, particularly in comparison with other academic disciplines.
- 3.17. A related problem with educational research highlighted by many of the stakeholders was the size of most research projects. The tendency to use qualitative methods in research has meant that research projects are often relatively small-scale, or vice-versa. The presence of small-scale research was not seen as a particular problem in itself. However, a consequence of a relatively large amount of small-scale research was that the research tends to be non-cumulative and has led to fragmented knowledge generation.
- 3.18. Underlying many of the methodological limitations of educational research were false perceptions of many methods. As a consequence there appear to be 'methodological identities' that seriously hinder choice of methods in research. These 'methodological identities' can often last throughout a research career. In turn these false perceptions are reproduced in the teaching of research methods.
- 3.19. Many stakeholders believed that the lack, or narrow focus, of research training was a key factor in the methodological limitations of educational research. Too many researchers without formal research training and the narrow focus of traditional doctorates compounds this problem.
- 3.20. Interestingly, there was a notable absence in the stakeholder interviews of discussion of the role of continuing professional development beyond researchers' initial research training. This illustrates how little concern has been given to the way researchers develop their research skills and knowledge throughout their research career.
- 3.21. Underlying all the problems of research training discussed above was the belief that educational researchers are a relatively unique group of people with very

different academic and career backgrounds. This includes at which stage of their life many individuals become educational researchers and what academic backgrounds they have. There was a general belief that the diverse, and perhaps ad hoc, creation of research careers may have led to the disparate and limited nature of some educational research.

- 3.22. It was noted that there are few educational researchers who come through the 'typical' route of undergraduate degree, to postgraduate training, on to postdoctoral research, and then finally to research career stability. Many individuals come in to the educational research community in mid-career, and, as a result, tend to 'miss' a research apprenticeship.
- 3.23. A number of stakeholders pointed to the requirements of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) as adding to this problem. Consequently, many education departments, established to prepare students for teaching, consider research to be of less importance. Some of the stakeholders saw a direct connection between this and the quality of educational research. Their argument was that in the light of the RAE many of these ITT staff have been pressurised to undertake research of some form. Since they have not had any research training, nor have the opportunity to develop their research skills and knowledge, they are likely to do small-scale research and without being able to critically review the methods and methodology they employ.
- 3.24. Since entry into educational research may tend to be it can also mean that the average length of time for each individual to be engaged in research over their career could be significantly lower than in other academic disciplines. The consequences of this may be three-fold. First, the researcher is less likely to find time to accumulate an extensive knowledge of a range of research methods. Secondly, the potential for each individual to undertake cumulative research projects is greatly reduced. The third consequence, highlighted by nearly all of the HE researcher stakeholders, is the perception of an ageing education research community, being led by a generation of researchers who came in to education research without formal research training.

4. Building educational research capacity

- 4.1. The first two parts of this report, in effect, provide the rationale for considering the need for improvement in educational research. However, 'capacity-building' as an approach to this is seen by some as being problematic. One stakeholder, for example, found difficulty with the choice of terms being used. However, they also seem to associate such an approach with a cynical political desire to perhaps control and engineer change in the research community.
- 4.2. This may be a premature criticism, particularly, as in the case of the TLRP Research Capacity Building Network (as presented in this report), the definition and approach to capacity building is based upon extensive consultation with the community itself. But even this approach to 'capacity-building' has its critics, since it tends to lean towards rhetoric rather than substance.

- 4.3. Many of the stakeholders came to the interviews with an idea of what ‘capacity-building’ is or should be. An alternative view would be for ‘capacity-building’ to be ‘aspirational’, where the perceived gaps in educational research are only part of two greater objectives: (i) to maximise the current potential for high-quality research; and (ii) to ensure there is the greatest opportunity for a research community to meet the new demands of an ever-changing society.
- 4.4. Clearly the constraints on educational research occur at a number of levels. Therefore, ‘capacity-building’ needs to operate at all of these levels and, as identified by one stakeholder, capacity building activities are beginning to emerge at a variety of levels.
- 4.5. Whatever form ‘capacity-building’ takes it requires the research community to engage with it. In particular it requires researchers, at whatever stage of their careers, to identify their own needs.
- 4.6. As discussed earlier, the relevance of research has been questioned by a number of sources. The stakeholders notionally supported these criticisms, although they took the view that these were system-wide issues and not the sole responsibility of educational researchers. Consequently, the stakeholders, notably the policy-makers and those researchers already closely engaged with the policy-making process, were able to identify how each of the relevant parties needed to respond in order that research becomes more relevant and has greater impact upon policy and practice.
- 4.7. It was suggested that the research community had to acknowledge the importance of research relevance, and ask itself a number of fundamental questions before beginning to identify ways of ensuring research could be useful. It was also clear that those responsible for the policy-making process would also have to engage with the task of improving the relevance and impact of research. But the emphasis was typically on the researchers to focus greater attention on the policy-making and implementation processes. Therefore the research community needs to understand the whole process much better before it can improve the relevance and impact of its research.
- 4.8. One of the concerns of the stakeholders was how educational research could be undertaken, and utilised, to generate better quality and sustained knowledge. The general perception was that educational research tends not to produce the kind of evidence that can be transformed into useful knowledge; the forms of knowledge helpful in the work of both practitioners and researchers themselves. For practitioners, the stakeholders argued, educational research needs to produce more useful tools or artefacts for them to apply, thereby improving, for example, their delivery of particular curricula. Similarly, some stakeholders argued that educational research tends not to address issues of causality, and hence can undermine the validity of explanations offered by educational research. Good theoretical development within educational research depends upon the importance given to issues of causality in the creation of useful research knowledge.
- 4.9. Another way in which educational research could generate greater and

improved knowledge, both practically and theoretically, as proposed by the stakeholder below, is to encourage greater scholarship within educational research.

- 4.10. Many stakeholders suggested that what was actually needed was *more*, presumably, quality, research. In particular, there is a perceived need for more replication studies, and greater opportunity for such studies, in educational research. This could involve the greater sharing of data generated by educational research and greater availability of useful data.
- 4.11. One final factor discussed by stakeholders in relation to the ways in which to improve knowledge generation in educational research was of the role of the practitioners, and therefore the policy-makers also. For example, the argument was given that 'knowledge' can only be generated with the help of, say, practitioners after researchers have transformed their research findings into research evidence.
- 4.12. A key solution, it is felt, to many of the concerns outlined earlier is to undertake more inter-disciplinary research. The belief is that the range and level of expertise of research methods and methodologies in education would be greatly enhanced if it were more interdisciplinary.
- 4.13. It was clear from the interviews with stakeholders that educational research can already be seen to be multi-disciplinary in some respects. However, there was a strong feeling that this did not constitute *genuine* inter-disciplinary research.
- 4.14. Many stakeholders articulated the need for inter-disciplinary research in terms of social science research, more generally. The implication to their argument was that social science research, whatever this was, had something to offer educational research.
- 4.15. The idea of making education departments or research units more inter-disciplinary was relatively popular amongst the stakeholders. They tended to relate this approach with the perceived need to build substantial, in volume, research departments, units or centres. Other stakeholders argued that the best economies of scale for greater inter-disciplinary research could occur at a more regional level, similar to ESRC-funded research centres.
- 4.16. A key obstacle to greater inter-disciplinary research is the intellectual 'snobbery' amongst other disciplines.
- 4.17. Many stakeholders, particularly those from the HEIs, were very aware that there are some serious issues relating to the employment of researchers employed in HEIs with external research funds.
- 4.18. The increased involvement of practitioners in the research process is also seen by some stakeholders as a way of changing the composition of the educational research community in order to build research capacity. However, there are concerns that the use of practitioners in research could actually be damaging rather than building capacity. The mediated form of practitioner-research is

certainly the model projected by the majority of stakeholders. This would be to involve them in research alongside more experienced and formally trained researchers.

- 4.19. Another way of building research capacity via changes to the organisation and composition of educational research is to develop the role of the LEAs in research. Although it is felt that capacity for research in LEAs has increased recently it has tended to be limited in its scope – responding to pressures from central government in meeting particular requirements.
- 4.20. A significant constraint on improving the quality and relevance of educational research was that of the research capacity of individual researchers. There was an overwhelming perception that at the end of the day not only was it necessary to remove obstacles and provide mechanisms to develop research capacity there was also a need for the majority of, if not all, educational researchers to consider the way they approach and undertake educational research.
- 4.21. The areas that stakeholders raised for individual capacity-building were almost entirely based around research methods and methodologies, and the need for continuing development of such skills throughout researchers' careers. In particular, they focussed on: issues relating to research design; the need for more quantitative research; how to overcome a perceived qualitative-quantitative schism; addressing the relationship between qualitative and quantitative methods, i.e. combining and/or mixing methods; and suggestions for new innovative approaches and techniques that can help to build capacity in educational research.
- 4.22. In terms of research design the stakeholders are clear that the basic principles need to be addressed. For example, many stakeholders made the point that the methodological approach and choice of methods has to be determined *after* a research question has been identified and not to allow research to be 'method-driven'.
- 4.23. As identified earlier one of the most significant 'deficits' in educational research is in the use of quantitative methods. It is not surprising, therefore, that nearly every stakeholder addressed the issue of building capacity in quantitative educational research. Not only would this help to extend the range and balance of methods in educational research but some stakeholders could see how this would help develop better quality research irrespective of the methods used.
- 4.24. Irrespective of the level of quantitative sophistication applied in research, the stakeholders all believed that there needs to be a greater capacity across the whole education research community in being able to 'consume' these techniques and to have the ability to critique the data, methods of collection and methods of analysis.
- 4.25. One of the key obstacles, identified earlier, to building the capacity for quantitative research is the difficulty in overcoming issues of 'identity' between different methodological approaches. This illustrates the hurdles that need to be overcome in order to build the capacity in educational research to 'consume'

and use quantitative methods and methodologies. In some respects research capacity-building needs to address these issues of ‘methodological identities’ just as much as it needs to train researchers in quantitative methods.

- 4.26. Research project leaders need to encourage new researchers to develop their skills in both quantitative and qualitative research methods. There should be no resistance to using either quantitative or qualitative methods, and instead a ‘fit for purpose’ approach should be taken.
- 4.27. Although the quality and rigour of qualitative research was questioned, very few stakeholders discuss the need to build capacity in qualitative research.
- 4.28. Many of the stakeholders are keener to suggest that individual researchers need to consider building the capacity to develop and use relatively new and innovative research methods and methodologies. These included the greater use of ICT, and, in particular, the techniques and technologies to analyse video footage. Similarly, this stakeholder suggests that there is a need to develop the skills and knowledge on data collection methods.
- 4.29. As discussed earlier, one set of factors that are perceived to limit the development of educational research are the non-traditional and varied career paths into this research. For the majority of academic disciplines the PhD or doctoral research is the most significant formal training a researcher receives. Clearly one way to increase research capacity in education could be to increase the number of doctoral students. However, very few stakeholders saw this as a principal way of building capacity in education.
- 4.30. As many of the stakeholders argue ‘capacity-building’ must also target existing researchers. As discussed earlier this means that educational researchers must identify their own limitations and needs. They then must be given encouragement to build their individual capacities. They should also be encouraged to participate in further research training. The model proposed by stakeholders is no dissimilar to traditional continued professional development (CPD).
- 4.31. Throughout stakeholders repeatedly talked about the need to develop skills to understand and critique research as well as to develop skills to undertake research. This distinction is useful in terms of the ‘capacity-building’ needs of the entire educational research system, since many stakeholders have called for the ‘users’ of research, including practitioners and policy-makers, to be able to ‘consume’ existing and future research. The distinction is also useful within the research community itself. Even if the composition of a research team is organised around a division of labour, where each member has expertise in a relevant area, there is still a need for all members of the research team to be able to understand their colleagues.
- 4.32. It is also necessary to take this approach to building capacity just to ensure that individual researchers have a basic level of ‘competence’ in new methodological developments, even if they or their research team will never actually use these methods.

4.33. However, alongside this particular model of building capacity to ‘consume’ methods and methodologies should be a desire to show, with examples, how such methods can be used. There is, as the following stakeholder indicates, a danger of ‘under-training’ researchers such that they falsely apply methods or pay lip-service to new developments

5. Summary and conclusions

5.1. The stakeholder interviews have helped to set out five areas of attention for building educational research capacity. These are:

- (i) The organisation and composition of the educational research community – with the need to undertake greater inter-disciplinary research, to work in research groups with a breadth of research skills and approaches, and to assist in the development of new educational researchers’ careers;
- (ii) The need to enhance the methodological skills and knowledge of individual researchers – from the design of research projects, through to using new or combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, and in doing so overcome ‘methodological identities’ that stifle debate and critique;
- (iii) The need to improve research training, for new and existing researchers – including the need for researchers to identify their own individual needs, both to use and consume particular research skills, and then to provide the means to meet those needs through formal models of continued professional development and more informal intuitive models of developing research skills and knowledge;
- (iv) Improving relevance and impact – with the need to fully understand the relationship between research, policy and practice, and to identify ways of improving the use and impact of educational research; and this leads to the final area of attention; and
- (v) The need to generate better quality and more sustained knowledge – particularly in developing marketable commodities or tools and artefacts, informed by rigorous research, that can be applied in practice on the basis of its qualified effectiveness, and the need to focus more on causal links in education, which directly leads to greater theoretical development.