

361 Education research in UK higher education: connected research, policy and practice?

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

In May 2023, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) released a major report based on a survey of 1,623 education researchers working in higher education across the UK. This was the largest survey of its kind and presents a comprehensive and wide-ranging picture of education research and researchers. A prominent theme was the complex and changing relationship between research, policy and practice. In this paper we examine what the BERA survey reveals about the research-policy-practice nexus in education. We present original analyses, including survey statistics, multivariate quantitative analysis and thematic analysis of the extensive survey data. Our results explore the nature of education research and how specialisms within the field foster and inhibit knowledge exchange; education research as a contested space for organisations rooted variously in higher education, policy and practice; and the purposes, values and topics pursued by education researchers and their connection to policy and practice.

Full paper

In May 2023, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) released a major report based on a survey of 1,623 education researchers working in higher education across the UK (Morris et al., 2023). Representing about 20 percent of all education researchers in UK higher education, this was the largest survey of its kind and presents a comprehensive picture of education research and researchers. In this paper we examine what the BERA survey reveals about the research-policy-practice nexus in education. The accompanying conference presentation presents further original results drawing on survey statistics, multivariate quantitative analysis and thematic analysis of the extensive survey data.

The nature of education research

Education researchers are in many ways an 'atypical' HE workforce. More than 80 percent of education researchers come to academia as a second career – many from the school sector or teaching roles outside of higher education, and with about 30 percent coming from other industries, such as healthcare, engineering or charities. Education research has very few younger researchers, with just 3 percent of researchers in their 20s. To a large extent, academic education research is an assemblage of teachers-turned researchers and researchers coming from other disciplines. This is reflected in the fact that only 16 percent had education as the focus of their undergraduate degree and over 40 percent did not have education as the subject area of their highest qualification.

At its best, this second career, second discipline, workforce is a melting pot: forging powerful connections with schools and society, creating fertile ground for interdisciplinary research, and bringing vast external expertise into the academy. Education often proves an ideal space to blend pure and applied research and produce strong connections with policy and practice. An eclectic range of research methods are in use, suggesting a breadth of methodological expertise and knowledge. Half of survey respondents, however, rated their level of formal training in research design and methods as 'limited or none' or 'basic'. There is also evidence that longstanding concerns about divides between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' research remain. Rather than spreading and combining its diverse expertise, some education researchers are working in disciplinary, methodological and ideological pockets. There are myriad routes into education research, yet few uniting experiences to sustain common understanding and coherence.

Supporting education research

Education research struggles to maintain strong support from higher education and the school sector. Schools – tackling staff recruitment crises, funding shortfalls and many other pressing challenges – cannot provide reliable support. Moreover, the role of higher education in professional education is now highly variable across the UK. In higher education, education researchers experience the challenges of insecure work, casualisation and crushing workloads that will be familiar to many working within the sector. The education research funding environment is widely perceived to be austere and inequitable (only 9.2 percent of respondents thought that the process of allocating external research funding was fair). This can inflame the methodological divides touched on above. One survey respondent bemoaned how “larger-scale, quantitative studies are favoured over smaller-scale and qualitative research designs by funding bodies” while another, as if in response, criticised researchers who are “irrationally averse to evidence-based policy or anything to do with the quantitative measurement of educational outcomes.” Overall, education research receives relatively low status in academia, partly on account of its applied focus; yet it is often criticised by the more practically-minded for being ‘too theoretical and detached from reality’. Perhaps one indicator of this uncomfortable fit is that only 44 percent of education researchers in the survey were entered in REF2021 (and only 13 percent agree that the REF is a valid measure of the quality of education research).

Purposes, values and research topics

Education researchers interests are firmly rooted in deeply held values relating to learning, social justice and knowledge. The majority of respondents thought that education research should have some practical value, and many were motivated by professional and personal circumstances, often linked to previous and current work roles. There was an overwhelming sense that education research speaks to pressing issues of social and technological change and makes a real difference to children, young people and society. The situation described in the paper, however, suggests that many education researchers find themselves working in a tricky space, without the powerful institutional supports and autonomy which maintain other disciplines. Where researchers can secure the funding, and carve out the space, education research is social research at its best: innovative, meaningful and impactful. At the moment, this is not consistently achieved. It is a vision of what might be.

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