BERA

Making the most of education research

THE ECOSYSTEM & THE COMMON GOOD

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The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is the leading authority on educational research in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars, practitioners and everyone engaged in and with educational research both nationally and internationally. BERA is a membership association and learned society committed to advancing research quality, building research capacity and fostering research engagement. We aim to inform the development of policy and practice by promoting the best quality evidence produced by educational research.

Our vision is for educational research to have a profound and positive influence on society. We support this by promoting and sustaining the work of educational researchers. Our membership, which is more than 2,500 strong, includes educational researchers, practitioners and doctoral students from the UK and around the globe.

Founded in 1974, BERA has since expanded into an internationally renowned association. We strive to be inclusive of the diversity of education research and scholarship, and welcome members from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, theoretical orientations, methodological approaches, sectoral interests and institutional affiliations. We encourage the development of productive relationships with other associations within and beyond the UK.

We run a major international conference each year alongside a diverse and engaging series of events, and publish high-quality research in our peer-reviewed journals, reports, book series and the groundbreaking BERA Blog. We recognise excellence through our awards and fellowships, provide grants for research, support the career development of our members, and nurture an active peer community organised around networks, forums and special interest groups.

BERA is a registered charity (no. 1150237) and is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales (company no. 08284220). We are governed by an elected council and managed by a small office team based in London.

ABOUT THE BERA EXPERT PANEL ON EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH FUNDING

In 2024 BERA Council established an expert panel to investigate the situation regarding funding for educational research in the UK. Chaired by David James (Cardiff University and chair of the REF 2021 Education sub-panel), the panel was a continuation of BERA's *Education: The State of the Discipline* initiative, which identified funding for educational research as a priority area for BERA to develop work in. The expert panel was commissioned to clarify the changing landscape of funding for educational research and to help BERA to understand the research environment and act to support educational researchers.

The aims of the expert panel were to:

- Present a map of the nature and volume of funding for educational research, highlighting notable trends over time and how this compares to other social science disciplines.
- Give an informed analysis of the elements of infrastructure and current relationships between research, policy and practice in the UK, including key variations across the four jurisdictions.
- Consider and articulate a view on the extent to which these current arrangements: (a) serve goals such as enabling research capacity building or fostering imaginative and creative responses to educational challenges; (b) serve the common good and a selection of stakeholders such as children, learners, citizens, educators, researchers, institutions.
- Present recommendations that are forward-looking, and which may lead to improvements, where possible drawing on exemplars of interesting practice.

This report was commissioned during the presidency of Vivienne Baumfield and brought to completion under the presidency of Marlon Lee Moncrieffe. It reflects BERA's ongoing commitment to advancing education research for the common good.

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Foreword

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) commissioned this report as a continuation of our wider *Education: The State of the Discipline* initiative. While instigated by BERA, it represents the independent work of an expert panel and offers a rigorous and timely analysis of the health of education research in the UK. We are particularly grateful to David James for leading the panel and to its members who gave their time and expertise.

The panel's work builds on insights from the *Education: The State of the Discipline* initiative, including the largest survey to date of education researchers working in UK universities. That survey revealed a complex and often challenging landscape: while education research is diverse and valued, many researchers face heavy workloads, limited time for research, and concerns about career progression and job security. Respondents also highlighted inequalities across institutions and raised questions about the fairness of research funding systems. These findings underscore the urgency of addressing structural issues and ensuring that education research in the UK remains a vibrant, sustainable discipline.

This report takes our previous insights further and demonstrates both the strengths and vulnerabilities of the education research ecosystem. Education research in the UK is world-leading in quality and impact, as evidenced by recent Research Excellence Framework (REF) results, yet the sector faces significant challenges. Chief among these is the sustained decline in funding for education research over the past decade. Despite education being one of the largest areas of public expenditure, investment in education research remains disproportionately low — around 0.05 per cent of education spending. This imbalance threatens the capacity of the field to generate knowledge and respond to complex challenges.

The pressures on higher education finances, reductions in government funding streams, and the shrinking, merging and, in some cases, elimination of university education departments, compound these difficulties. At the same time, the diversification of those involved in education research — while offering opportunities for innovation — has introduced fragmentation and reduced transparency as well as limiting accountability.

These trends make it harder to maintain a coherent strategy for education research and to ensure that resources are directed toward the common good.

Against this backdrop, this report calls for a renewed commitment to long-term investment in education research and for greater interdisciplinary collaboration. Many of the issues facing education, such as persistent attainment gaps, the implications of artificial intelligence for learning, and the intersection of education with health, housing and social care, are 'wicked problems' that demand joined-up thinking across disciplines and sectors. Education research is uniquely positioned to contribute to these efforts, but only if the conditions for sustainable capacity-building are in place.

BERA already undertakes substantial work to support the research community, including professional development, networks, small-scale research funding and advocacy. However, as the report notes, these efforts could be articulated more coherently and for outside audiences. BERA welcomes this challenge and will consider this among the wider recommendations for the BERA Council as part of our next strategic planning cycle. In doing so, the BERA Council will determine which actions should be prioritised and appropriately resourced.

This report is an invitation to dialogue. Much of its commentary and recommendations speak directly to research leaders in universities, funding bodies and policymakers across the four nations. These stakeholders have a critical role in shaping a healthier education research ecosystem — whether through supporting interdisciplinary collaboration, promoting transparency in funding or enabling more productive research–policy–practice relationships. By pooling our expertise and resources, we can strengthen the education research ecosystem and ensure that it is equitable, transparent and sustainable and that it continues to serve the common good.

Vivienne Baumfield
(BERA president 2022 to 2024)

Executive summary

This report is the outcome of the work of an expert panel commissioned by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). Having described key aspects of the shape and quality of education research and its fundamentally inter and multidisciplinary nature, the report examines how to strengthen the UK's education research ecosystem for the common good. It highlights several current difficulties including declining funding, increased fragmentation and the limited efficacy of some current system-level assumptions and arrangements. The report considers the range of research-practice and research-policy models across the UK nations and illustrates how a comparison of them is instructive.

The report asks 'How can we build and sustain forward-looking and generative education research that most stakeholders, most of the time, regard as helpful and important in shaping policy and practice?' In answer, the report argues for a 'systems' perspective. A healthy education research ecosystem would include 'better listening' in the form of more open forums for agenda-setting and horizon-scanning, formalised in an observatory. It would also include greater transparency in respect of any public resources made available or used in education-focused research. A healthy ecosystem would include a re-consideration of the current balance of investment between knowledge brokerage and knowledge generation while nurturing more collaborative, interdisciplinary and partnership-rooted forms of research.

The expert panel offers recommendations for two principal audiences, namely those in research leadership positions in universities, and BERA Council. However, there are also 'actionable insights' for other major stakeholders, specifically organisations that fund education research, national government departments and regional organisations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THOSE IN RESEARCH LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN UNIVERSITIES

- Ensure that education researchers are at the heart of community-focused and regional activities and opportunities in which the university is involved.
- Enhance education researchers' capacity to research in partnership with policymakers, practitioners and other community stakeholders, and engage in effective knowledge exchange.
- Encourage interdisciplinarity in research bids, projects and publications.
- Support teacher educators to conduct high-quality research on classroom practice that can inform teacher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BERA COUNCIL

- Work with relevant learned societies, professional associations and other stakeholders to scope and propose the shape and governance of a new observatory for education research which would: gather and share information; provide a formal mechanism for dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders; and facilitate horizon-scanning and research agenda-setting.
- Provide active support, learning opportunities and resources for members wishing to enhance their capacity to research in partnership with policymakers, practitioners or other community-based stakeholders, to participate in interdisciplinary research and/or engage in effective knowledge exchange.
- Work closely with other relevant professional associations and learned societies to develop more joint understanding and action on the education ecosystem, including the relationship between teacher education and research.
- Continue to foster and support 'research-on-research' that is likely to light the way for further action towards better and healthier research infrastructures.

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS FOR OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

- Organisations that fund education research are strongly encouraged to:
  - promote and incentivise interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity and cross-sector collaboration in research on issues that have educational, social, environmental, economic and health dimensions
  - promote horizon-scanning activities that engage a wider range of relevant stakeholders (including professional associations) in working together during the formation and refinement of research agendas.
- National government departments and other organisations that fund education research from the public purse should:
  - review the balance of public resources devoted to research that generates new knowledge, and research that seeks to mobilise existing knowledge
  - publish clear and accessible information at least annually on all spending on education research and evaluation initiatives, including details of amounts, recipient organisations and the nature of the commissioning process, such as whether through open tender
  - enable and incentivise key staff and organisations to partner with researchers working in roles outside government.
- Regional government organisations are encouraged to:
  - work collaboratively with their local universities and other organisations to shape research and impact agendas that meet local needs.

1. The report in context

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the work of an expert panel, convened by the British Educational Research Association as a continuation of its *Education: The State of the Discipline* initiative. In the run up to Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029, the report examines changes in funding for education research and their relation to the wider education ecosystem.[1] Its main recommendations are tailored to those in research leadership positions in universities and to the BERA Council. However, there are also insights for others, including the range of research funders actively funding education research, and education policymakers in the four nations of the UK. We hope that the report will be of interest more widely, to all those who create and who use education research.

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1 The aims of the expert panel were to:

1. Present a map of the nature and volume of funding for educational research, highlighting notable trends over time and how this compares to other social science disciplines.
2. Give an informed analysis of the elements of infrastructure and current relationships between research, policy and practice in the UK, including key variations across the four jurisdictions.
3. Consider and articulate a view on the extent to which these current arrangements: (a) serve goals such as enabling research capacity building or fostering imaginative and creative responses to educational challenges; (b) serve the common good and a selection of stakeholders such as children, learners, citizens, educators, researchers, institutions.
4. Present recommendations that are forward-looking, and which may lead to improvements, where possible drawing on exemplars of interesting practice.

1.2 OVERVIEW & BACKGROUND

This report considers the contribution that education research can make to the betterment of society, and the contribution education researchers can make to addressing the multidisciplinary nature of many contemporary policy problems as well as the many challenges and opportunities of everyday practice. To realise these benefits, we need:

- different ways of setting research agendas, better structures for knowledge exchange, and more co-ordinated horizon-scanning processes
- more open forums that enable stakeholders across the education research ecosystem to interact productively
- plural understandings of educational and societal phenomena and corresponding approaches in research
- recognition that regional and local priorities may diverge from those of central governments
- more sustainable routes to research funding that build capacity for the future.

Many of the most important issues that society faces are 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973): they are complex, multifaceted social or policy problems which do not have simple solutions. Such issues require a multidisciplinary approach if they are to be tackled adequately. There are many such problems that are visible in educational settings but which have their origins elsewhere.

In recent decades, governments across the UK have placed considerable emphasis on reducing attainment gaps in educational outcomes and this has become an important focus in education research. Nevertheless, the disadvantage gap persists and, in some cases, has widened over the past 10 years (National Audit Office, 2024). At root, attainment gaps are linked to child poverty and the pressures that economic and social factors place on our most under-resourced communities. Regional disparities are structural and can only be fully addressed by taking a broad range of factors into account, including nutrition, health, housing and social care. This not only requires shared strategic links across governmental departments but also a multidisciplinary approach to research.

Education as a discipline has an important and distinctive contribution to make here. Its growth and establishment over the last 100 years have included drawing on, adapting and combining a range of disciplinary perspectives, methods, models and insights, most prominently from psychology, sociology, economics, philosophy, history, linguistics and social policy. Education research *comprises* a wide range of questions and approaches: in a strong sense it is an 'interdisciplinary discipline'. This means it is well positioned to play a key role in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research and to create new knowledge and understanding that can address a large range of educational and societal issues.

This report considers the range of factors that shape research funding and determine the uses to which it will be put. It does this to identify what is needed to enable education research to play a stronger part in tackling complex problems while also supporting educational activity for the common good.

1.3 THE STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The remainder of this chapter describes how the ecosystem is changing and the changing size and shape of university-based education research.

Chapter two looks more closely at a principal 'flow' in the education research ecosystem, namely research funding. It notes the contemporary uncertainty in the funding environment for universities before turning to social sciences research funding, and within that, changes in the nature and level of investment in education research.

Chapter three considers research-practice relationships, highlighting several prominent models including dissemination, brokerage and reflective practice. A classification of research usage is introduced, followed by a brief examination of how policy frames the research-practice relationship in the four countries of the UK. The chapter ends with a suggestion for the direction of travel in such relationships.

Chapter four focuses on research-policy relationships and the theories of change that they embody or imply. Having considered the changing impact agenda, it turns to look at differences and similarities across the four nations of the UK in how research-policy interactions are framed.

Chapter five draws on the previous chapters to begin to answer the question: How can we build and sustain forward-looking and generative education research that most stakeholders, most of the time, regard as helpful and important in shaping policy and practice? It begins by looking at ways in which a healthier ecosystem for education research may be secured, then sets out arguments for achieving 'better listening' and for the need to build system capacity for the tackling of complex problems.

The final chapter (chapter six) lists recommendations for two key groups, namely those in research leadership positions in universities, and BERA Council. It also sets out some key actionable insights for the range of research funders actively funding education research, and for education policymakers in the four nations of the UK.

1.4 HOW THE ECOSYSTEM IS CHANGING

The range of people, organisations and interests involved in some way in education research does not stand still, and neither do their activities and the interactions and relationships they have with each other. This makes the concept of 'ecosystem' helpful.[2]

A traditional UK education research ecosystem involved state actors (such as the relevant government departments and organisations responsible for funding higher education) working together with universities and local authorities (sometimes with the latter two linked to schools, colleges and industry partners). Nowadays, the ecosystem is more pluralistic. Internationally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has become a key reference point in promoting educational policy change and knowledge brokering. Nationally, think tanks and non-governmental organisations (such

2 We use 'ecosystem' in a way that acknowledges its origins in botany and ecology. Tansley introduced the concept in 1935, wanting to promote a 'systems' understanding, 'in the sense of physics'. For Tansley 'it is the *interactions* that define a system, not simply the objects that fill it' (Tansley, 1935). This includes 'a set of processes/flows of matter' (Blew, 1996). There is some overlap with the concept of 'innovation ecosystems' (see for example OECD, 2025a), but also many parallels with perspectives in social theory which are relational, incorporate concepts of power, and make the system the primary focus or unit of analysis, remaining alert to connections, synergies and mutual affordances, but also tensions and outcomes that are both intended and unintended.

as quangos and multi-academy trusts) and charities (such as Teach First and the Education Endowment Foundation) are also prominent actors, particularly in England. These changes have created a stronger market for technology companies, publishers and independent research organisations. The origins and effects of this diversification are complex and have been examined by, among others, policy sociologists (for example Ball, 2007) and those looking at changes in management and governance in the public sector (for example Newman, 2004, 2005) as well as more specifically, in school systems (for example Greany & Higham, 2018), further education (James et al., 2021) and education policy (Ranson, 2008; Morris & Perry, 2025).

The most prominent rationale for diversifying actors in matters of the state has been to improve innovation and efficiency. An education ecosystem that contains a diversity of organisations with a range of different missions, interests, cultures and operational approaches can create new opportunities to collaborate. But without a clear definition of goals and purposes, collaborations between public and commercial sectors can also raise conflicts of interest. Tracing the connections and motivations of networks that operate in education is now more complex than it was in earlier forms of the education research ecosystem. It can be harder to see who benefits and who loses from different forms of funding that may be less obviously tied to the common good. In turn, individuals and organisations begin to interact in different ways. There are fewer formal and institutional structures and regular events scaffolding these interactions. Yet these once contributed to the joint identification of research priorities. For some time, in England at least, personal networks and lobbying have become more prominent ways of operating (Ball & Junemann, 2012). As one learned society chief executive told us, it has become increasingly difficult for researchers and those representing them to engage in open dialogue with policymakers.

[some policymakers] have got a mindset that ... you're not worth anything unless you can mount a strong lobby, ... so much so that ... [they] ... say what's your pitch? ... That approach is super difficult for academic communities, learned societies and so on, because ... we're not a company. We don't have bucketloads of resource to be put behind lobbying, we don't employ lobbyists.

Learned society CEO

The sorts of change outlined above are particularly pronounced in England. Many view democratic accountability as having diminished following statutory changes in the role of local authorities to organise schools and colleges and the establishment of new organisations that have taken on some of their functions and are in competition (Greany & Higham, 2018; Locatelli, 2019). As roles and responsibilities have become more fragmented, it becomes less apparent who will lead on bringing elements of the system together and making the most of its different parts. This point is exemplified in a government-commissioned report on English further education which found that heavy reliance on the market had produced high levels of financial failure and a need for more strategic co-ordination by central government so that colleges could serve their communities effectively (Ney, 2019). To operate in the interests of the common good, an education research ecosystem needs to be underpinned by values that extend beyond the market. It requires transparency in governance, engagement with communities and leadership brought about through a systems-thinking lens – a point we return to later in this report.

1.5 UNIVERSITY-BASED EDUCATION RESEARCH

A changing ecosystem includes more diversity in the range of organisations carrying out education research. However, it is not currently possible to arrive at a reasonable estimate of the total funding in education research in the UK or the numbers of people doing such research.[3] By contrast, good data are available in respect of university-based education research, where a large part of education research is carried out.

A changing research ecosystem includes changing conditions under which university-based education research is produced. In line with other disciplines, university-based education research makes an important contribution to generating new knowledge. Yet one distinctive feature of the discipline in higher education (HE) is the variety in the size of departmental units and the relatively large number of small units.

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3 See Mills et al. (2017) for an earlier attempt to quantify this. We found that some partial impressions can be gleaned from the public-facing documents of individual funders.

Figure 1
Education submissions in REF 2021 by size of FTE

FTE range	n	%
5-9	15	18
10-19	32	39
20-29	15	18
30-39	10	12
40-49	6	7
50 +	5	6
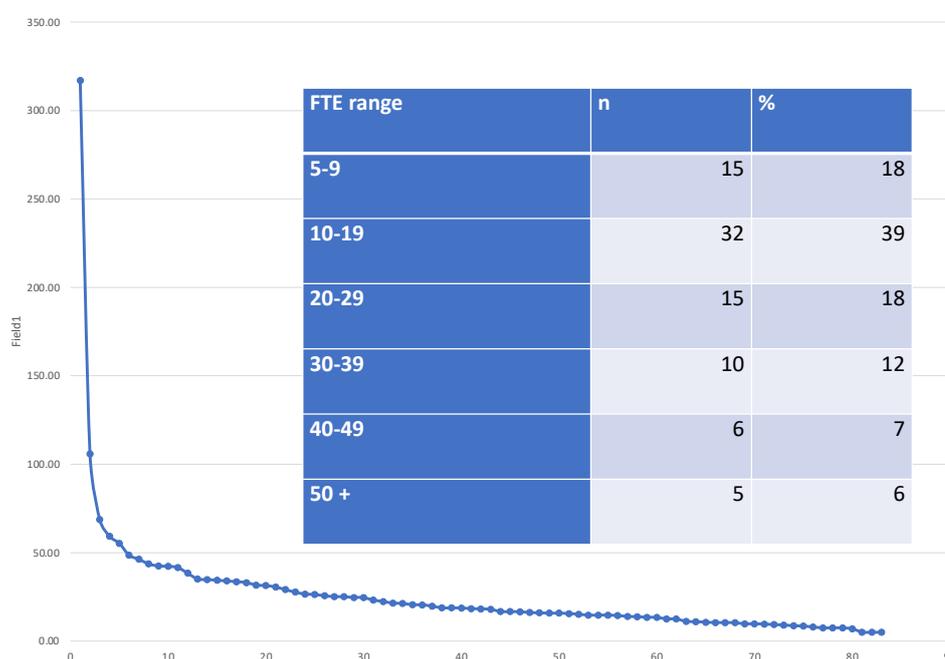
Figure 1 shows the distribution of education submissions to the REF 2021. Five of the 83 submissions were larger than 50 full-time equivalent staff (FTE) (with University College London Institute of Education the outlier at almost 317 FTE), and 15 were between five and nine FTE. This range is unique among REF submissions and relates to the departments' relationships with teacher education (Furlong & Lawn, 2011). Indeed, in England, the previous administration's decision to actively encourage school-led initial teacher education (ITE) has directly affected the viability of many education departments, a factor we return to in discussion of education research funding.

Despite these differences in unit size, REF 2021 demonstrated that the quality of education research was high and had risen in recent years in both outputs and impact. Over 51 per cent of research impact gained the top score, placing education some way ahead of the social sciences average (see Appendix D). A separate study underlines the strongly collaborative nature of education research publications in the decade up to 2020, where of 26,836 articles, books and chapters, 42 per cent involved interinstitutional collaboration and a quarter of these were collaborative with authors based in 138 countries other than the UK (Oancea et al., 2021, p. 95 and p. 88).

There is a good level of public-facing information about the volume, nature and quality of education research carried out by universities. But education research also takes place in a range of organisations and is characterised by a changing ecosystem.

2. Funding for education research

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the UK, the pressures on HE finances are increasing and the reliance on international student fees to cross subsidise other activities, including research, looks increasingly unsustainable. (Lewis & Bolton, 2024; Bolton et al., 2025; Morris & Watermeyer, 2025). Data from institutional returns to the Office for Students forecast that 43 per cent of providers expect to be in deficit in 2024–25 (Office for Students, 2025); recent Universities and Colleges Union research states that in the year up to October 2025, the sector has seen the announcement of 15,000 job cuts.[4] There is a real possibility that solutions to these difficulties may result in greater stratification of the university sector. Against this background of instability and serious financial challenge, this chapter considers how funding for research has fared in recent years in the social sciences, then looks more specifically at recent changes in the nature and level of investment in education research itself. In the final section, we consider aspects of the wider context, including the influence of global forces and the significance of changes to teacher education, especially in England.

2.2 SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH FUNDING

A recent report from the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS), drawing on an analysis of nine years of data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), noted the strength of UK social sciences internationally.

The UK is a world leader in social science research and in the impact of that research, as evidenced in the 2021 Research Excellence exercise: 80% of social science research was world leading (37%) or internationally excellent (43%). Recent reports by the

Academy of Social Sciences and the British Academy further exemplify value for money and impact: social science is fundamental to understanding and helping mitigate many of the economic, social, place-based and environmental challenges we face in the UK, and in contributing to multi-disciplinary 'missions'

AcSS, 2024, p. 1

However, the report also noted that this success has been achieved despite a widening gap in funding between the social sciences and other major areas of research. They comment that the gap

has grown ever wider at the same time as social science research and impact has performed better than ever and the need for it is greater than ever. This is a supply constraint not a demand constraint

AcSS, 2024, pp. 1–2

The same report considered differences in the individual profile and trajectory of research funding for social sciences disciplines. Over the past decade, research funding has risen in psychology; geography and environmental studies; business and management; and sport science and leisure. Other social science disciplines maintained the real-terms value of research funding over the period, but education and public health were exceptions. The AcSS report noted:

The irony will not be lost that the areas experiencing university research funding decline in real terms are education and public health research; both are among the most important and challenging issues for the UK Government and both health and education are massive consumers of public expenditure. Further investigation is recommended in both cases to understand what lies behind these research funding changes

AcSS, 2024, p. 24

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4 University and College Union (2025, 10 October). (News item). https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/14220/ New-analysis-shows-over-15000-university-job-cuts-as-UCU-launches-UK-wide-strike-ballot

2.3 EDUCATION RESEARCH FUNDING: SOURCES & DISTRIBUTION

The Academy of Social Sciences analysis identified a real-terms decline of approximately 10 per cent in funding for education research over the nine years up to 2021 (AcSS, 2024, p. 23). Research income data recorded in the last two cycles of the REF confirms this analysis but also describes an even greater reduction. Comparing the average annual education research income across all education submissions in REF 2014 and REF 2021 shows a real-terms reduction of around £12 million per year, a decline of 17.4 per cent (James, 2023; James & Azubuike, 2026).

The downward trend is in a context of small overall investment in education research. Total public spending on education is high[5] and second only

5 Real-terms public spending on education was £106 billion in 2020–21 and constituted 4.5 per cent of GDP (ONS *Education and training statistics for the UK,* release published 21 August 2025). https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-and-training-statistics-for-the-uk/2024

to public spending on health, yet investment in education research is minuscule. Where health research approximates to 1.7 per cent of health-related public expenditure, the equivalent figure for education research is around 0.05 per cent, that is, one-twentieth of one per cent (British Academy & Royal Society, 2024, p. 4; James & Azubuike, 2026).

The AcSS analysis of research grant income by type of funder between 2013 and 2021 shows a dramatic change in main sources for education. Figure 2 shows that the highest income source in 2013 was the UK government, but after 2013, this steadily declined until 2019. During that time UK government funding for education research fell by 42 per cent. Although income from this source began to increase again after 2019, by 2021 it was still around 36 per cent below its 2013 level.

While it varies considerably over the same period, research council funding shows a substantial increase overall. By 2021, it was 44 per cent higher than in 2013 and had become the largest source of income for education research in the UK, approaching double the value of UK government funding. Research council funding is prestigious and is secured through highly competitive processes of peer review in which

Figure 2
Education research grant income 2013 to 2021 (£million)
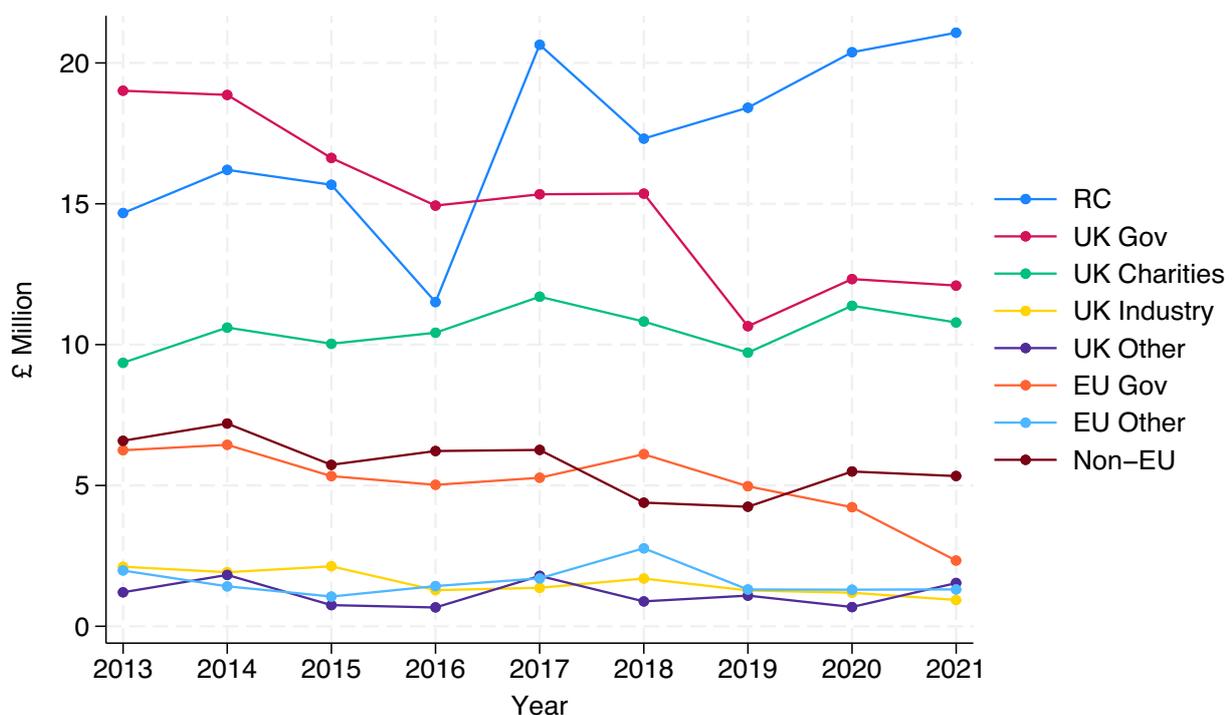
Source: AcSS — HESA (adjusted to 2021–22 prices using the HM Treasury GDP indices). EU = European Community; RC = research council; UK Gov = UK Government.

education-focused proposals compete with proposals from other disciplines. In REF 2021, two-thirds of the 83 education submissions mentioned funding from research councils in their environment statements, though the nature, number, size and value of these grants were highly variable. It is also important to note that a large range of organisations are eligible for research council funding, including independent research organisations and businesses.[6]

Figure 2 also shows that, although funding from EU governments increased slightly from 2013 to 2014, it steadily declined between 2014 and 2017, resulting in a 16 per cent decrease by 2017 compared to 2013. By 2021 income from the EU was 63 per cent less than in 2013, in part linked to Brexit and changes in access to EU funding that this brought. Income from all other sources (UK charities, industries and others) remained relatively unchanged during the 2013–2021 period.

The shifts described immediately above take us up to 2021. In regard to research council-funded education research, a more recent picture can be derived from the UKRI gateway to publicly funded research and innovation web-based tool,[7] using filters for ESRC-funded research grants and fellowships in the fields of education, sociology of education, education and school, education policy and psychology of education. We began by comparing two four-year periods of ESRC grants and fellowships, that is, those with start-dates in 2017–2020 (period A) and those with start-dates in

2021–2024 (period B). Initially, these two periods looked very similar: in A there were 134 items with an overall value of £70.8 million, while B showed 133 items with an overall value of £72.6 million. Furthermore, the size distribution of awards was similar for the two periods, except that the proportion of awards of over £1 million fell from nine per cent to six per cent.

However, a closer look at the more recent period gives cause for concern. As table 1 shows, between 2021 and 2024 the numbers of beginning grants/fellowships reduced from 44 to 21 (a decline of more than 50 per cent) and their combined value fell from £15 million to £5.6 million (a reduction of 63 per cent). This shift is too recent to be visible in either the REF 2021 data or the HESA data discussed above.

The 2022 start-year appears an outlier, with a much higher total value of grants awarded. However, this figure includes five grants (12 per cent) valued at over £1 million, two of which amount to almost £20 million for the commissioning of administrative data research centres at Swansea and Edinburgh Universities.[8]

6 See https://www.ukri.org/publications/organisation-eligibility/research-organisations-eligible-for-ukri-funding/#section-businesses

7 See https://gtr.ukri.org/

8 Use of the *gateway* dataset is its own powerful reminder that some education research is deeply integrated into programmes of interdisciplinary and multifaceted research activity. Searching for 'education' will produce lists that include some very large investments such as Administrative Data Research Centres and Understanding Society: The UK household longitudinal survey. Educational matters are of course a fundamental component of such work, but clearly one among many dimensions. Great caution is, therefore, required if we are to avoid over-estimating the value of actual investment in education research.

Table 1

ESRC education research grants and fellowships with start-years from 2021 to 2024

Start year	Number of grants/fellow-ships	Total value	Mean award	Median award	% under 99k	% 100k to 399k	% 400k to 699k	% 700k to 999k	% £1m and over
2021	44	£15.0m	£342k	£106k	27	59	7	2	4
2022	42	£43.0m	£1.03m	£256k	24	33	21	10	12
2023	26	£8.7m	£335k	£153k	15	50	19	12	4
2024	21	£5.6m	£268k	£140k	29	52	5	14	0

Source: UKRI gateway to publicly funded research and innovation. Percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

The downward trend in education research funding from the UK government appears to be part of a longer trend. The Main Panel C report for REF 2014 shows that research funding from the UK government across all social sciences reached a peak in 2004–5, then declined quite rapidly up to 2012–13.

The REF 2021 sub-panel noted that there had been:

...a decline in major national programmes of educational research compared to the period considered in REF 2014. Together with specific reductions (e.g., in Official Development Assistance funding) and uncertainties following Brexit, the current level of investment in educational research along with reduced potential for international collaborations and impact presents considerable risks to the discipline.

REF, 2022, p. 169

In recent years much UK government education research funding has been channelled through the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). This is an independent charity established with a founding grant from the Department for Education (DfE) in 2011 with a core mission to break the link between family income and educational attainment.[9] The organisation was recently re-endowed with £137 million in funding for the next 10 years, up to £41.5 million for implementation of numeracy and literacy programmes and £40 million for further education-related research and dissemination. While the EEF is formally independent of government, its mission closely reflects a core strategic priority of the DfE and the DfE sometimes partners with the EEF[10] to fund projects (Oancea et al., 2021, p. 49). The research itself is carried out by a range of organisations, and the EEF annual report for 2024 shows that a minority are university-based.[11]

9 See EEF annual report 2024 at https://d2tic4wvo1iusb. cloudfront.net/production/documents/annual-reports/ eef-annual-report-2024-v1.0.0.pdf?v=1756738228
10 This shared mission and occasional funding partnership suggests that the National Audit Office report cited earlier (NAO, 2024) would have relevance in weighing the efficacy of some of the work of the EEF.
11 The EEF annual report for 2024 lists 21 'evidence building' projects approved for funding during that year for which the identity of a delivery team is also given. Funding amounted to over £10.5 million across these. Four of the 21 delivery teams were universities, conducting projects collectively worth

2.4 EDUCATION RESEARCH FUNDING IN ITS WIDER CONTEXT

UK education research is part of an international field, and its activities and capacity are affected by shifts in the international landscape, including geopolitics. An important example is Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding, the purpose of which is to promote and target the economic development and welfare of low- and middle-income countries. ODA-funded programmes like the Newton Fund and the Global Challenges Research Fund have changed the way in which international research is conducted by universities and promoted cross-disciplinary and challenge-led research (UUK, 2024). ODA funding is now under great stress as several key donor countries including the UK reduce their contributions. The impact of this has been estimated as a reduction of between nine and 17 per cent in the level of this form of aid in 2025 (OECD, 2025b). This is predicted to have a major negative impact on children across many of the poorest countries in the world (UNICEF, 2025). It is also likely to have radical effects in terms of the many research and evaluation activities, networks and structures that have been established to design, implement and support activities, many of which have strongly education-focused elements.

The recent removal of US funding for research projects by President Trump's administration, including in education, affects UK research capacity. UKRI's North America office notes that, since 2015, approximately 3,000 research awards involving some £3 billion, had been made in collaboration with the US.[12] The education-specific figure is not available but de-funding of research concerned with aspects of diversity, equality and inclusion will have particularly affected education research. Equally, Brexit and the UK's arms-length relationship with EU funding schemes have had a large and detrimental impact on research in the UK over the past decade, as seen above in figure 2.

£1.8 million, under 18 per cent of the total. The same annual report lists 17 projects completed in 2024. In further correspondence, the EEF has confirmed that the independent evaluations associated with these projects had a total value of £5.3 million. Six of the 17 evaluations were awarded to university-based teams and these represent around 27 per cent of the total value. See https://educationendowmentfoundation. org.uk/about-us/annual-reports
12 See https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/international-funding/our-international-offices/ukri-north-america/

In addition to changes in the sources of funding for education research, university education departments in England have faced other challenges. HE remains an important route for teacher supply, with over half of newly qualified teachers coming from that route.[13] However, government policy under the previous administration was to prioritise school-based teacher education over university-based teacher education. The Initial Teacher Training (ITT) market review (DfE, 2021) led to a re-accreditation of programmes, with the aim of creating more diversity among providers. Despite evidence of good quality,[14] good retention rates and relative efficiency (Allen et al., 2016), 10 university providers were not re-accredited. At the same time, new actors such as the Oak Academy and the National Institute of Teaching (NIOT) were awarded £43 million[15] and £121 million[16] respectively from the DfE in 2022, and NIOT was given a key role in taking the school-based route forward. From the perspective of the university sector in England, funding for teacher education programmes has become unstable and uncertain, and this appears to have encouraged casualisation of employment and an increase in the use of teaching-only contracts. Thus, marketisation of the provision of teacher education has affected research capacity in the sector.

Such a market-based HE system, with competitive funding and cross-funding, results in a fragmented system, with institutions free to channel their funds as they see fit. The flip side of this freedom is a less coherent approach.[17] As one of our interviewees pointed out:

... the whole university culture in England — the way research gets cross-subsidised from things like international fees, and everything — just highlights the absence of any strategy behind that ... the research mission is much less explicitly funded than in other systems

Director of a global policy forum

2.5 CONCLUSION

Our analysis shows a significant decline in investment in education research that is in universities. In part this reflects the wider context of the pressures that the university sector is under more generally and how this is impacting on the social sciences, but there are also other factors such as shifts in the global context and, closer to home, changes to ITE in England.

We noted earlier the diversification of the ecosystem: one ramification is that the quality and accessibility of information about education research investment have also become more diverse. There is high-quality public-facing information on education research conducted in universities, but this is not always the case when it comes to that conducted by other kinds of organisation. We identify a need for greater transparency and our recommendation for an observatory for education research is partly driven by this situation.

The next two chapters reflect on the contribution research makes to educational practice and the research-policy relationship, paying particular attention to the landscapes across the four countries of the UK.

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13 See https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/initial-teacher-training-census/2024-25#dataBlock-94d37ef9-f87d-4aa6-bcd2-5f37f477dbe6-tables
14 All existing ITT providers had been rated at least 'good' by Ofsted.
15 https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-05-02/hl7602
16 https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/national-institute-teaching-all-you-need-know
17 And perhaps new forms of risk. Heavy reliance on international student fees has recently revealed a new form of instability, whereby a foreign government appears to have forced a suspension of some leading research by threatening to cut the supply of international students (The Guardian, 2025, 6 November. See https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/nov/06/china-critical-uk-academics-speak-out-extremely-heavy-pressure-beijing)

3. Research-practice relationships in the UK

A FOCUS ON PEDAGOGY

This chapter reflects on the role education research plays in informing teaching, learning, leadership and related practice, and how ideas about the influence of research on system improvement have changed over time. It also sets out how education policymakers in the four nations of the UK have adopted different approaches to connecting research with practice. In some instances, this has led to structural change.

3.1 MODELS OF THE RESEARCH-PRACTICE RELATIONSHIP

The research–practitioner relationship has always been of interest and concern to education researchers. Equally, many teachers and leaders of educational organisations continue to be informed by and interested in making greater use of education research. Over time, the relationship has taken on a variety of forms on a spectrum from a top-down model, in which researchers essentially disseminate research findings to teachers, to one in which the teachers themselves are the active researchers, acting as reflective practitioners.

The dissemination model in its 'classic' form consists of researchers providing practitioners with access to their research papers. This approach has become part of some countries' policies. In the Netherlands, for example, a pilot programme was launched in 2019 granting all teachers in primary, secondary and vocational education free access to EBSCO,[18] a comprehensive database containing over one million scientific articles on education research (CEDEFOP, 2020). By providing free access, the initiative sought to empower teachers to enhance their teaching practice with the latest insights from education research. Within the first six weeks, approximately 17,000

teachers registered for access, indicating a strong demand for such resources.

However, such approaches face major issues from the users' point of view. First, academic publications are not written for a practitioner audience, who can find them dense and hard to understand. Second, the proliferation of academic publications means that it can be very hard for a practitioner to process the volume of material on any particular topic, or to ascertain which sources are most valid and most useful. This dissemination approach is, therefore, unable to substantively develop the research-practice relationship.

An alternative model that has been prevalent in recent years is one in which brokerage plays a key role. In its simplest form this is essentially an extension of the dissemination model, in which research is 'translated' and 'filtered' for practitioners to ensure it is summarised and presented in a digestible way. This approach is exemplified by the EEF through its toolkit and guidance reports. It is also evident in the proliferation of books and publications that aim to provide research-based guidance on practice, and in the growing number of consultancy companies working in this area. While sometimes popular, these resources put the teacher in the position of consumer of research.

In fact, short reviews on how to put into practice a range of education research and models run the risk of developing a narrow and decontextualised approach to using research, which doesn't do justice to the complexity of education and how it is bound up with lives and circumstances beyond the educational institution. For example, the resources available are much more likely to focus on pedagogical attainment-related issues than on the relationships between educational institutions and the communities they serve. It is not clear whether the considerable continued investment of public money in this approach is informed by independent

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18 'EBSCO' is an acronym for Elton B. Stephens Company, an American publishing company founded in 1944.

evaluation.[19] Such an approach is also at odds with long-established research and thinking about the nature of professionalism and professionality and the role that research can play in fostering these (see for example Biesta, 2015; Eraut, 1994; Hordern, 2024; Hoyle & Wallace, 2005; Müller & Cook, 2024; Sachs, 2016). Several of our interviewees commented on this problem, with one saying that the model expects teachers and leaders to adopt the outcomes of intervention studies that have been conceived and concluded in other contexts and are, therefore, effectively asked to overlook the significance of their own context:

...the idea that we know how good learning happens, that we know what great teaching is, [and] therefore we don't need to problematise that any further [and] we can just get on with it ... I think that is deeply problematic.

CEO of a professional body

This interviewee went on to explain that rich concepts of professionalism necessarily involve the questioning of such 'false certainties'. In other words, professionalism must draw on and engage with a much wider range of research than pre-defined intervention studies if it is to 'build...the wisdom and repertoire of the individual'.

Other models encourage teachers to act, in part or wholly, as co-constructors of research. This may take the form of joint practitioner–researcher teams, drawing on the different strengths and perspectives of each.[20] Other examples include research or lab school models, whereby universities or other research organisations partner with schools or colleges to undertake and implement research that is immediately relevant to the institution (Penuel et al., 2025). Upskilling staff and learners in research methods is another prevalent option internationally.

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19 An analysis of 141 of the RCTs funded by the EEF showed that very few had sizeable benefits compared to 'business as usual' in schools (Lortie-Forgues & Inglis, 2019).

20 Partnerships of this kind were a feature of several projects within the largest UK programme of investment in education research to date, namely the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (2000 to 2011). In one such project, practitioners in further education colleges contributed to design, data-gathering, analysis, publication and communication (Hodkinson et al., 2007).

At the other end of the spectrum from positioning teachers as consumers of research is the concept of the reflective practitioner in education. This is rooted in the early work of John Dewey, who emphasised the role of reflective thinking in teaching and learning. His work laid the foundation for the integration of reflection into teacher education and ongoing professional development (Dewey, 1910). In *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Schön (1983) introduced the concepts of 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action', highlighting how professionals think critically during and after their practice. This work acknowledged the complexity and uncertainty inherent in real-world teaching (Schön, 1983). This perspective encouraged teachers to become researchers of their own classrooms, using reflection as a tool for understanding and transforming their work. Contemporary examples of this approach include the *Reflective Teaching* series published by Bloomsbury which spans teaching across contexts from early years to HE.

Although championed by policy in some of the four nations of the UK, the reflective practitioner model asks a lot of the teacher. Work within this model can risk falling between two stools – on the one hand overly constrained by research designs and notions of rigour and validity to fully fit the need to inform practice, and on the other too small-scale and limited in scope to contribute significantly to the broader education research field.[21]

3.2 RESEARCH UTILISATION

As whole system reform has gathered pace, interest in research use has become more central to education policymaking, both in the UK and internationally (for example, OECD, 2025c). Carol Weiss' model of research utilisation is particularly helpful in thinking about how things stand in education policy (Weiss, 1979). Weiss distinguishes four main types of research use. These can all be seen in the research-practice relationship in the field of education:

3.2.1 Instrumental use
This is the most direct use of research, where findings are applied to solve specific problems or to inform

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21 These issues, and a discussion of how four consortia of teachers and researchers sought to overcome them, can be seen in the evaluation of a major Teacher Training Agency (TTA) initiative that took place in England from 1998 to 2001. See Simons et al., 2003.

concrete decisions or policies. For example, a school might use research on literacy strategies to choose a new reading programme. This is the prevalent model in the 'brokerage' approach, in which teachers primarily use research as a tool to improve their classroom practice. This is sometimes a preferred approach to research among practitioners.

3.2.2 Conceptual use

Here, research helps shape how policymakers, teachers and organisations view an issue. Even if it doesn't lead to immediate change, it contributes to a gradual shift in mindset or framing. This approach to research is one that academics often favour, and it can lead to partnerships with practitioners and policymakers, designed to reframe how an issue is understood, and on that basis develop new approaches in situ (Moss et al., 2022). Policy and practice in education include many live issues for which how a problem is conceptualised changes what people do to address it, or even whether it is regarded as something to address.

3.2.3 Symbolic use

This refers to research that is used to justify or legitimise pre-existing decisions or positions. Sometimes called 'strategic' or 'tactical' use, this occurs when research is cited to gain support, credibility or political cover, even if it didn't actually inform the decision-making process. This involves cherry-picking research to support the argument being made.

3.2.4 Process use

This refers to the benefits that come from being involved in the research process itself, such as increased learning or capacity building among participants. The act of engaging with research (for example, in collaborative inquiries or participatory research) can influence practice and organisational culture. Both reflective practitioner approaches and co-constructive approaches seek to build capacity in professional knowledge in this light.

3.3 POLICY, PEDAGOGY & THE PRACTITIONER–RESEARCHER RELATIONSHIP

Across the UK there is very much a 'mixed economy' in terms of practitioner–researcher relationships. In England there is more emphasis on a dissemination model and instrumental use, while in Wales the emphasis is more on following a reflective practice model and capacity building through process use.

3.3.1 England

Education policy in England has invested in a broker-led dissemination model, with major investment put into the EEF for this purpose. The EEF has a strong influence on the system. Key dimensions of this include the randomised controlled trials (RCTs) it commissions; its toolkit and guidance reports that synthesise research studies; its role in DfE requirements on how schools must spend their pupil premium grant;[22] and its explicit endorsement and co-branding of the two DfE framework documents underpinning initial teacher education.[23] Thus, the EEF has a significant role in setting the terms of compliance and, therefore, in matters that are pivotal in processes of inspection and accountability.

The EEF toolkit lists impacts of educational interventions using a ranking of effect size, confidence in the findings, and costs in a format that makes these aspects easy to grasp, but it does have important limitations. The interventions reviewed for the purposes of synthesis and meta-analysis encompass a large range of studies, conducted at different times and in different places, and without agreed definitions of core concepts in education, such as motivation or instruction. In addition, the list provides little explanation of how to apply findings in context. This weakens its usefulness for practitioners. By contrast, the EEF guidance reports provide more information and practical tips for implementation. They place more emphasis on reflective use in practice, though in a largely decontextualised fashion.

EEF's toolkit has become a prominent element in the knowledge-brokering activity that takes place in England, with a range of other brokering organisations and commercial consultancies now also active in this area. At the same time, both reflective practitioner models and the pure dissemination approach can also be found in use. Although this diversity of approaches is also present in the other UK nations outside England, other jurisdictions retain more emphasis on building locally-based and collaborative partnerships that bring practitioners together in pursuit of common goals.

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22 See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium and https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/using-pupil-premium

23 See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6061eb9cd3bf7f5cde260984/ITT_core_content_framework_.pdf and https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/661d24ac08c3be25cfbd3e61/Initial_Teacher_Training_and_Early_Career_Framework.pdf

3.3.2 Scotland

In Scotland, the government has placed more emphasis on collaborative action research[24] as a method for educators to work alongside researchers in investigating and enhancing educational practices. This collaborative approach is in line with the process model of research use and empowers teachers to actively participate in research that directly impacts their teaching methods and student outcomes. In partnership with Education Scotland and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, the collaborative improvement initiative encourages locally-based partnerships to form among local authorities, educators and researchers. These are designed to identify strengths and areas for development at local level and to strengthen a network learning system of school improvement.

3.3.3 Wales

In Wales, both the *Curriculum for Wales* and extensive reforms to teacher education emphasise the integration of research and enquiry into professional learning for educators. The teacher-as-researcher role is encouraged by the inspectorate, Estyn, which supports initiatives in which teachers undertake research projects to improve their practice. For example, pioneer schools collaborate with the Welsh government and other institutions on curriculum and professional learning developments, allowing teachers to engage directly with research and to apply findings in their classrooms. However, as in Scotland, it is not always clear that there is sufficient resource and attention given to developing and supporting teachers to undertake these tasks.

3.3.4 Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland (NI), the TransformEd NI education strategy (Department of Education, 2025) stresses the importance of an evidence-based system and proposes the development of a central mechanism for the dissemination of research to practitioners. This aligns more with the models or researcher–practitioner relationships found in England, with its emphasis on research dissemination and knowledge brokering. More longstanding relations between HE and schools in NI focus on barriers to learning, addressed through locally responsive research.

24 See https://education.gov.scot/media/oibg5di2/sacfi12b-car-overview.pdf

3.4 CONCLUSION: WHERE TO NEXT?

The variety of models used in the different nations of the UK to bring research into more productive dialogue with practice demonstrate some of the unresolved issues in school improvement. In a context in which system improvement has become a key policy aim globally, the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation has been investigating how to enhance the use of research to inform educational policy and practice (OECD, 2023; 2025d). Its series of published reports recognises the difficulty of finding a one-size-fits-all prescription. The potential of different approaches depends on a range of factors.

Some teachers and leaders in educational institutions will flourish as practitioner–researchers, while others will be able to improve their practice by drawing on research findings presented to them. The contrasting models that the different jurisdictions of the UK have adopted raise questions about the relative priority that should be given to education funding for knowledge brokering or for knowledge generation, and the extent to which funding for the latter could or should encompass more explicit models of co-construction. Such models might involve researchers and practitioners jointly identifying research questions and creating more productive conditions for sharing findings.

It is also important to recognise that productive research-practice relationships can and should extend beyond the immediate pedagogical and performative dimensions of 'school improvement' as those are often conventionally understood. There is scope to incentivise and enable researchers and teachers/leaders to work together to tackle issues of current concern and/or to identify new and important areas of investigation that could lead to improvements, perhaps attuned to local or region-specific needs.[25]

25 Developments of this kind may also contribute to solving some of the difficulties around teacher recruitment and retention. As the leader of an international policy organisation told us: '[In the UK] there has been so much focus on making teaching financially more attractive, but the key [now] is to make it intellectually more attractive...and that is not receiving attention. I think that you [should] somehow make use of the collective wisdom of the profession rather than atomise it'.

4. Research-policy relationships in the UK

THEORIES OF CHANGE & SYSTEM REFORM

This chapter looks more closely at how education research and education policymakers interact in the four nations of the UK and the theories of change that shape the relationships between them. It begins with an outline of how the research impact agenda in the UK has evolved over time, before turning to the spaces that policymakers in the four nations of the UK create for research and policy to interact.

4.1 THE IMPACT AGENDA & THEORIES OF CHANGE

Seeking and measuring the impacts of research through the REF is now a core part of university activity, and this is an area in which education has excelled (see Appendix D). At the same time, how impact is conceived is itself evolving, through explorations of how research findings translate into policy and practice and the necessary conditions for their social benefits to be realised. This has led to greater scrutiny of the underlying theories of change that researchers, policymakers and funders sometimes adopt. To give two contrasting examples: 'What Works' centres were funded to bring about change in different areas of the public sector by disseminating evidence to professional communities of practice, whereas later funding opportunities have encouraged researchers to engage with a broader range of stakeholders over the research cycle in processes of two-way knowledge exchange. Examples include the Healthy Ageing Programme; the InterAct Network;[26] local policy innovation partnerships; and the ESRC Education Research Programme. REF 2029 recognises these different strategies by assessing engagement and impact.

Best & Holmes (2010) helpfully group the theories of change researchers most frequently invoke into three categories:

- linear models — these use the language of *evidence-based practice* and are based on principles of *knowledge transfer*; research is a product and the exchange process is one-way
- relationship models — these use the language of *knowledge mobilisation* and *knowledge brokering*. *Evidence-informed practice* is best developed through processes of shared learning that depend upon close collaboration between researchers and intended users
- system models — these recognise that structures mediate the types of interactions that take place; systems are dynamic and constantly changing through the complex interaction of interdependent parts.

These are useful categories to think with.

It is now generally recognised that decisive transformations in policy and practice do not automatically flow from research being shared, and that high impact seldom flows naturally from the best research (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018; Smith, 2013; Cooper, 2014; Oliver et al., 2014). Studies consistently show that outcomes are less certain and more prone to alter over time than some policymakers or researchers might like to admit (Head, 2008 & 2010; Cairney & Oliver, 2018). The contribution that system models make is in the kind of attention they pay to the many social and contextual factors that militate against direct, immediate and predictable effects following from any particular intervention (OECD, 2025d).[27] They hold up to scrutiny the 'prevailing mental models' or sets of foundational beliefs that researchers themselves adopt and which may actively obscure,

rather than illuminate, the real causal connections at play (Greenhalgh, 2021). Instead, system models focus on the more nuanced question: 'what works, for whom, under what circumstances and why?' (Pawson & Tilley, 1997 & 2004; Greenhalgh, 2021; see also Biesta, 2007 & 2010).

Uncertainty of outcomes complicates the relationship between research and policy. Policymakers may well look for evidence to inform the decisions they are about to take. But they also take a range of other issues into account.

These are the other things that politicians react to as well as evidence. We do have a political vision. We are prejudiced. ... let's take [school] selection [of applicants]. You can argue selection's good, depending on what your values are and what you want to achieve. We do respond to public opinion. We have to. They are the people who we're accountable to. We do respond very quickly to crises and emerging events ... and that means that you've not got time to look at the evidence. We do respond to our political opponents.

Policymaker

These realities are part of the backdrop to policy decision-making (Head, 2008 & 2010; Cairney & Oliver, 2018). How best to create meaningful change as research and practice interact remains an open question.

4.2 WHAT WORKS IN 'WHAT WORKS': THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION POLICY

As policy-driven education reform has become an integral part of government activity, so education (and especially, school-based education) has become high profile politically. The decisions politicians make about the curriculum and about assessment become part of the political fray. In this context, misalignment between policy aims and research findings can create tensions and dilemmas. On the one hand, short-term evaluations of impacts on pupil attainment from a Minister's policy interventions may not uncover deeper and longer lasting impacts on children's learning. Equally, from a policymaker's perspective, rapid evaluations of a policy initiative that needs time to bed down can create political risks. This hinders system learning.

... if at the very start of what we thought was a really good policy that we've invested millions of pounds in, a researcher decides to do research very early, on one

aspect of it ..., and it shows that it's not making the progress that it should do, that becomes the headline news, and that's really, really tough for us. ... [even if] later research that the very same organisation did show that they were, in fact, quite good. That's problematic for a politician.

Policymaker

The interactions between research and policy are particularly difficult in high stakes accountability systems when outcomes from assessment and inspection attract widespread attention and lead to a discourse of blame (Ball, 1990). More realistic calculations of what can or cannot be done, by whom, and a clearer intention on both sides to learn from what doesn't work, would help put relations between policymakers and researchers onto a more positive footing. As one policymaker commented:

There is a whole area here that we should be discussing and trying to find a way through. It is solvable. We just don't. We start saying to each other, you're causing me problems rather than, we're causing each other problems. What do we collectively need to do?

Policymaker

4.3 RESEARCH IN EDUCATION POLICY

Considering the sorts of difficulties just outlined, what are the specific research strategies for education that each of the devolved administrations in the UK have set out? What kinds of relationships do they envisage between researchers and policymakers?

4.3.1 England
In England, the DfE sets out departmental areas of research interest (ARI). These are determined by the Secretary of State and are the primary means the DfE uses to engage with the research community. The 2025 version has 'one overarching question with 2 parts':

- *What are the best (most cost-effective and scalable) ways that education and children's social care can increase opportunities and address disadvantage (socioeconomic and other forms) throughout children and young people's education and care journeys and into the labour market?*
- *When, where, how, and for whom do they work best?*

DfE, 2025, p. 7

The ARIs envisage a simple demand and supply relationship with the research community. While the same document mentions an engagement strategy to foster 'a more dynamic research ecosystem where research, data and funding opportunities are more visible and readily accessible' (DfE, 2025, p. 33), there is little reference to joint agenda-setting. It is unclear who will pay for generating the research sought. The document comments:

We hope that this document will help those applying to funding bodies by enabling proposals for new research to draw a direct line to the Department's ARI and strengthen the case for the possible public impact of the research

DfE, 2025, p. 33

The emphasis is on the instrumental use of research to aid policymaking, based on a linear model of dissemination from the research community to government to meet the latter's needs.

4.3.2 Scotland

The Scottish Government recently published a plan for school research (Scottish Government, 2023). The plan has four stated objectives: delivering robust and timely evidence to support the policymaking process; collaboration with key partners; supporting independent education research; continuing to improve data access. The plan envisages parts of the system working relatively independently from each other to achieve common aims:

an education system that will: support the rights of all children and young people; offer quality teaching and learning that suits the different needs of each learner; and help learners with their goals and meet the needs of a changing world

Scottish Government, 2023, p. 4

Collaboration and consultation are seen as essential to making the plan work. The emphasis is on conceptual uses of research to support and inform the policymaking process and to help frame how specific issues are understood. It embeds a relationship model that assumes collaboration between those involved.

4.3.3 Wales

The Welsh government has a National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (Welsh Government, 2021). Its aims are more specific: to help build research capacity across the system in three interdependent domains:

a national infrastructure to support educational research and enquiry; research capacity and volume within HEIs [higher education institutions]; an evidence-informed profession

Welsh Government, 2021, np.

Knowledge-sharing between researchers and practitioners in the interests of system quality and to strengthen professional enquiry are the central focus. A process use of research is embedded in a relationship model.

4.3.4 Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, recurring suspensions of its power-sharing executive have interrupted education policymaking, leaving researchers and practitioners freer to identify topics of mutual concern locally and find ways of working on them in the absence of national initiatives. This has led to a lack of direction and policy impact from research. Given the background of community tensions and religious segregation, including within the education system, ameliorating these issues has often been the spur for research partnerships. Since devolved government resumed in early 2024, a new Minister for Education has launched a series of initiatives designed 'to improve access for teachers to education research' as part of a broader reform strategy. The document *TransformED NI: Transforming Teaching and Learning: A Strategy for Educational Excellence in Northern Ireland* (Department of Education, 2025) sets out how it will establish:

an evidence-informed system using the best available research, data and evidence to shape the policies, practices and decisions that will govern our education system for the next decade.

Department of Education, 2025, p. 10

This is a mainly instrumental view of research embedded in a relationship model that translates research into practice.

4.4 CONCLUSION

These research policies envisage different kinds of relationships between researchers and other stakeholders. In England, ARIs concentrate on finding the evidence required to inform policy decision-making. The absence of any explicit reference to the relationship researchers might have with teachers and leaders on the ground is a result of other system changes. A succession of other policies has built

stronger connections between educational institutions and a range of knowledge-brokering organisations while weakening the relationships between these institutions and research expertise based in universities.

In Scotland and in Wales, a consensus model still applies. Although reform has been extensive in areas like curriculum and teacher education, changes to the social organisation of schooling have been much more modest. The necessity of involving a range of parties in working together on a particular endeavour remains core to what happens, even if this continues to be difficult to engineer. In Wales, research and partnership working are fundamental to reformed teacher education, and all reforms must reflect the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. In Scotland, addressing the social dimensions to education gives child poverty, health and wellbeing a much more central place on the research agenda. Northern Ireland has only recently returned to self-government. It is in transition, as it begins to navigate its own path through system reform.

A wide range of factors influence the policy turns taken. It is against this background that the next chapter considers the potential for change.

5. Education research for the common good

We saw earlier that AcSS has argued that the UK does not make full use of its world-leading social science capability. Education research demonstrates this point especially well: it is an area in which there is considerable scope for developing a more vibrant ecosystem. Our goals include drawing attention to prevalent synergies and tensions but also to possibilities, seeking to encourage fresh perspectives on what education research could and should be doing in a democracy. How can we build and sustain forward-looking and generative education research that most stakeholders, most of the time, regard as helpful and important in shaping policy and practice?

This chapter looks at ways in which a healthier ecosystem for education research may be realised, setting out arguments for achieving 'better listening' and highlighting the need to build system capacity for the tackling of complex problems.

5.1 THE BIGGER PICTURE – CREATING A HEALTHIER ECOSYSTEM

UNESCO (2015) developed the concept of the global common good to help clarify why education should be based on principles of democracy, solidarity, inclusion, tolerance, universal freedoms, equality and individual rights. Setting and delivering research agendas under these principles requires consideration of the whole ecosystem. If researchers are to engage with others and to respond collectively to societal concerns, then we need an ecosystem that functions well.

The education ecosystem in the UK is complex. While school-based education is important, it is only part of a much broader landscape that also spans early years, special education, further, higher and vocational education, lifelong learning and the education/work relationship. Creating more equitable communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive involves many different stakeholders working together. Tackling the wider societal causes of disadvantage requires a whole system approach. The UK government is now turning to public design principles[28] to produce policies that achieve their intent by collaborating with a range of stakeholders in the construction and testing of policies and addressing lived experiences. There is an appetite for a wider understanding of how social inequalities intersect with education. New partnerships that have formed to address this look well beyond pupil attainment as the sole measure of interest to a much broader range of indicators.

Cross-sector partnerships already exist in each of the regions of the UK, though they do not always attract the attention they deserve.[29] Each involves a broad range of stakeholders, from research, professional practice and the community, in working together on locally-defined problems. In their different ways, these kinds of partnerships work precisely because they are locally determined and speak to a wide range of interests. Both universities and funders are increasingly aware of the value of these forms of local partnership. But if this is the direction of travel, then the skillsets the education research community bring to community-based processes of knowledge exchange will have to change too. This is a model of working that does not rely on the logic of 'disseminate to', and where the problems of implementation are not confined to applying secure knowledge with fidelity to meet pre-defined goals. Rather it is about working in creative collaboration with other stakeholders on problems that may as yet be poorly defined and where research has a particular role to play in clarifying issues and helping to frame new questions. Potential improvements can be tested in the process of working alongside others.

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28 Public design evidence review: A brief guide (July 2025). See: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/687df3ca312ee8a5f0806bdd/PDER_Brief_guide_Final_PDF.pdf
29 They include Manchester's #BeeWell initiative; The Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives; the Local Policy Lab; and initiatives that link health and education including Born in Bradford and Marmot places.

To work well the ecosystem needs to reinvigorate this way of working. This applies in every one of the four nations. That may well mean reviewing how we resource and foster local partnerships. Best practice can be found in surprising places and needs to be better known.

5.2 BETTER LISTENING: MORE OPEN FORUMS FOR AGENDA-SETTING & HORIZON-SCANNING IN EDUCATION RESEARCH

The range of issues facing education are diverse, difficult to address, and increasingly pressing. They include the rise in the numbers of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and the association with persistent absence, the post-Covid impacts on pupil wellbeing, the links between a cost-of-living crisis, poor housing and pupil health and development. More broadly speaking, they include trying to understand the educational implications and appropriate educational responses to major social, economic and environmental challenges, such as rising wealth inequality, racism, sexism, climate change, rapid changes in the nature of work and the implications of artificial intelligence (AI).

Even in areas where goals appear highly specified and considerable resources have been directed over time, success has been at best variable. For example, a recent report from the National Audit Office (2024) on *Improving Educational Outcomes for Disadvantaged Children* states that despite DfE's strategic priority to reduce the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, this gap is wider than it was a decade ago. It also states:

Although DfE has reducing the disadvantage attainment gap as a strategic priority, it does not have a strategy, theory of change, or monitoring to understand how much it spends on interventions; how interventions align; or schools' and early years providers' capacity to do more. As a result, there is no clear rationale for how DfE splits funding between, for example, early years and schools. It also makes it difficult for DfE to prioritise and present a clear case for wider interventions across government

National Audit Office, 2024, p. 7

The same report states '...DfE cannot demonstrate it is achieving value for money' (ibid, p. 11). This criticism reflects the many problems that governments face in pursuit of centralised system reform, but also the limits of the theories of change and the nature of evidence they currently rely upon to reach their goals.

Curriculum, assessment and system monitoring are key drivers of school improvement. Differences in the tightness of curriculum specifications, the amount of assessment and monitoring data each national system collects, and how they are used impact on the education research agenda in different ways. Depending on how curriculum, assessment and accountability policies are implemented, they allow greater or lesser control over the system as a whole. But they can also narrow, rather than open, the range of education research questions that come to be considered.

Complex social changes of the kind signalled by the prospects of greater use of AI in education or the impacts it will have on the world of work are best addressed by creating opportunities for very different communities of practice to come together. Complex questions benefit from multidisciplinary approaches, and the capacity to cross boundary lines and work with other disciplines, other sectors and other stakeholders.

Research has got to become more interdisciplinary. I think funders should probably incentivise it more than they currently do. Just touching on the use of technology and AI, some of that... [research funding] is going to university psychologists. You need technologists, computer scientists, people who understand how our education institutions work, you need to understand the economics. It's hard to see really good work coming out of just a single discipline.

Research funder

In the case of AI in educational institutions, it is important that pedagogic priorities remain central and that policy agendas are not set by commercial interests. Forms of partnership that see researchers work alongside practitioners and the tech industry would help give greater prominence to the ethics of AI use in education, which is an increasingly important consideration (Eynon & Young, 2020).

More sophisticated forms of consultation and more strategic leadership in the education field would help bring a diversity of perspectives to bear on a particular issue. This is key to a deeper understanding of complex social questions and to good policymaking. It would lead to more creative research agendas that can help reframe thinking about where investment is needed.

I've met with the DfE to discuss the areas of research and to talk about where our work maps onto that. What I don't recall ever happening is having an opportunity to help shape those areas of interest.

Research funder

Systems thinking; public deliberation; mission-led government – all raise new ways of defining the issues under concern and determining how they might be addressed by attending to a more diverse range of stakeholder views. An 'observatory' which formally connects relevant government departments to other organisations representing researchers, practitioners and policymakers, and the wider community, would put each in a better position to know what others are already doing, and create clearer awareness of crucial knowledge gaps.[30] This can be hard to organise at scale and might work best by focusing on a common interest, or alternatively through a series of regional observatories that can build and maintain strong links to place.

5.3 BUILDING RESEARCH CAPACITY TO TACKLE COMPLEX PROBLEMS

'Building research capacity' has sometimes been viewed in a narrow and technical sense, as referring to enhancing the nature and volume of methodological skills and tools that pertain among researchers. Equally important is to see research capacity as a property of the affordances of (and relationships in) the system and as product of what is *expected or required of* education research. Democratic accountability in education depends upon a viable research community and benefits from a plurality of perspectives and methods. Different research questions require different approaches: the complex questions that education generates benefit from the mix. Taking this point seriously means questioning the assertions and assumptions that have sometimes been made – by some researchers and some users of research – about an inherent superiority of some research methods over others. Such assumptions are directly refuted in evidence from REF (REF, 2022, p. 159).

We also recognise that there is an important distinction to be made between knowledge generation and knowledge mobilisation. Recent years have seen a great deal of investment and growth in the latter, with

30 The joint Royal Society/British Academy programme on education research has recently recommended something along the same lines, though envisaged as initiated by government: 'Government should pilot a model of advocacy and coordination to strengthen the educational research infrastructure. This would offer strategic advice to government and help to translate evidence into practice'. See: https://royalsociety.org/news-resources/projects/education-research/

a focus on practitioner use, but declining investment in the former. A healthy ecosystem needs both, and there is now an urgent question as to whether the balance is right. As one of our interviewees commented:

I've seen the DfE actual expenditure on research decline, and it is much more internally focused, it's about briefing and putting arguments together, rather than taking a longer-term view. The other thing that has happened is the stripping away of arm's-length organisations that also contributed and had a research function, that's all now being brought in house ... So you haven't got that arm's-length, slightly more detached role in terms of building up the long term evidence base. So I don't think it's just about GDP expenditure. All of those things have added up to mean that there's not so much public funding of evidence building.

Research funder

At a time of financial constraint, it is difficult to argue for more money for research without being very clear on what the returns will be. This difficulty is compounded by something that pertains to all kinds of research in every field: that the returns on investment can take a while to materialise:

One thing we know from looking back over a longer time period is that some of our most successful work hasn't actually become successful until 10 or 15 years down the line. I mean I was just in a meeting ... where it struck me that work we have funded many years ago was probably more germane now in terms of some of the specifics than it might *have been when it was published. You don't want to judge impact prematurely, you can take some time.*

Research funder

This is why setting research agendas that focus on only immediate policy needs and on the specific measurements they demand has the effect of 'short-changing' the ecosystem. Research investment must serve society for the longer term. This does not imply a blank cheque, and indeed some of the evidence cited in this report points to areas where current levels of investment might be used more effectively. The changes to the ecosystem envisaged in this report would bring more clarity on where, how and who can address the challenges education faces, and at what scale.

Chapter 1 (section 1.3) described the recent acceleration of diversification of actors in the education research

ecosystem to include more varied players and stakeholders beyond universities and the state. Potential benefits of this shift include a greater variety of voices and perspectives and more agile responses. Potential dangers include fragmentation, greater difficulty in knowing what the gaps in research activity are, the absence of direct information on quality, and conflicts of interest in the production and marketing of knowledge for use. Outside the university sector, public-facing information on who is doing what education research is sparse and is difficult – sometimes impossible – to access.

A healthy ecosystem would include more transparency in respect of any public resources made available or used in research. It would generate more synthesis, and more evaluation of the contribution education research makes in different settings, using the criteria Weiss (1979) identified (see chapter 3). All of this would help support much more strategic thinking across the sector with wider benefits for all.

The level of investment in education research appears very small in relation to public expenditure on education and to be disproportionate in terms of the immense significance of educational processes for individuals, society and the economy. We hope this report helps to nurture a positive dialogue about the level of that investment, and just as importantly, its nature and purposes. We also hope that the report helps all stakeholders to consider and then act upon improving their own contributions to the education research ecosystem.

6. Recommendations

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 5 we posed the question 'How can we build and sustain forward-looking and generative education research that most stakeholders, most of the time, regard as helpful and important in shaping policy and practice?' We identified several avenues for achieving a healthier education research ecosystem.

Some of our answers to this question take the form of recommendations tailored for two specific groups, namely (a) research leaders in universities and (b) the BERA Council. We choose these as our primary audiences because the report is intended to activate the field and to foster further discussion rather than to 'solve' problems.

We also offer some more general insights for other stakeholders, especially organisations that fund education research and the policy community in the relevant government departments in the four nations of the UK.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THOSE IN RESEARCH LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN UNIVERSITIES

- Ensure that education researchers are at the heart of community-focused and regional activities and opportunities in which the university is involved.
- Enhance education researchers' capacity to research in partnership with policymakers, practitioners and other community stakeholders, and engage in effective knowledge exchange.
- Encourage interdisciplinarity in research bids, projects and publications.
- Support teacher educators to conduct high-quality research on classroom practice that can inform teacher education.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BERA COUNCIL

- Work with relevant learned societies, professional associations and other stakeholders to scope and propose the shape and governance of a new observatory for education research which would: gather and share information; provide a formal mechanism for dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders; and facilitate horizon-scanning and research agenda-setting.
- Provide active support, learning opportunities and resources for members wishing to enhance their capacity to research in partnership with policymakers, practitioners or other community-based stakeholders, to participate in interdisciplinary research and/or engage in effective knowledge exchange.
- Work closely with other relevant professional associations and learned societies to develop more joint understanding and action on the education ecosystem, including the relationship between teacher education and research.
- Continue to foster and support 'research-on-research' that is likely to light the way for further action towards better and healthier research infrastructures.

6.4 ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS FOR OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

- Organisations that fund education research are strongly encouraged to:
  - promote and incentivise interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity and cross-sector collaboration in research on issues that have educational, social, environmental, economic and health dimensions
  - promote horizon-scanning activities that engage a wider range of relevant stakeholders (including professional associations) in working together during the formation and refinement of research agendas.

- National government departments and other organisations that fund education research from the public purse should:
  - review the balance of public resources devoted to research that generates new knowledge, and research that seeks to mobilise existing knowledge
  - publish clear and accessible information at least annually on all spending on education research and evaluation initiatives, including details of amounts, recipient organisations and the nature of the commissioning process, such as whether through open tender
  - enable and incentivise key staff and organisations to partner with researchers working in roles outside government.
- Regional government organisations are encouraged to:
  - work collaboratively with their local universities and other organisations to shape research and impact agendas that meet local needs.

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Appendix A: The panel

Jo-Anne Baird is Professor of Educational Assessment and Director of the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment. She has been Head of the Department of Education at Oxford, Standing Adviser to the House of Commons Education Select Committee, a member of Ofqual's Standing Advisory Group on Standards, Chair of the National Reference Test Expert Group, and a member of the Welsh Government's Curriculum and Assessment Group and the Scottish Government's Independent Review Group. Jo-Anne held academic posts at the Institute of Education (London) and the University of Bristol. In 2019 she was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Bergen.

David James is Emeritus Professor of Sociology of Education, Cardiff University. He was founding Director of the ESRC Wales Doctoral Training Partnership and editor-in-chief for the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* for almost a decade. He chaired the UK REF 2021 sub-panel for education. During his membership of BERA Council (2011–2017) David led the establishment of the BERA PG Forum which became its Early Career Researcher Network. He has published extensively for academic, policy and practitioner audiences, mostly on aspects of education and social inequality. Topics include assessment, learning, teacher education, the curriculum, professionalism and governance in schools, FE, HE, work-based and lifelong learning. David was awarded the Learned Society for Wales 2022 Hugh Owen Medal and was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2024. See https://profiles.cardiff.ac.uk/emeritus/jamesdr2

Huw Morris is an Honorary Professor of Tertiary Education at the Institute of Education, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society. He was previously Director of Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning in the Welsh Government for nine years and before that a university academic in London, Bristol and the Manchester City Region moving between posts from research assistant to deputy vice chancellor. He was a member of the REF sub-panel for education in 2021 and a member of the ESRC Grant Awards Panel from 2021 until 2025. He is a trustee of the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO). He was a member of the United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) (2013–2017) and is currently a member of the Skills England Expert Analytical Group (SEEAG). In recent years he has provided advice on different aspects of post-16 education to the five governments of the British Isles.

Gemma Moss is Professor of Literacy at UCL Institute of Education and Director of the ESRC Education Research Programme (2021–2026). The programme is exploring new ways of working in partnership across the boundaries between education research, policy and practice. Gemma has been BERA president (2015–2017) and a council member for the European Educational Research Association (2016–2018). With Lesley Saunders she started BERA's Educational Research and Educational Policy-Making special interest group. Her research interests include gender and literacy, literacy policy and how the shifting relationships between policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders are reshaping the knowledge landscape in education. She advocates for two-way processes of knowledge exchange that can act in the interests of the public good.

Daniel Muijs is Head of the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work and Professor of Education at Queen's University Belfast. He is an acknowledged expert in the fields of educational and teacher effectiveness, school improvement and research methods and has published widely in these areas. He is co-editor of the journal *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* and has held key advisory posts in a range of academic and professional organisations. He previously held professorial and leadership positions at universities in England and the Netherlands and was Deputy Director of Research and Evaluation at Ofsted.

Anthony Tomei was CEO of the Nuffield Foundation from 1995 to 2012. Since retirement he has held several non-executive roles, mainly in educational organisations. He is a member of the Royal Society's Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education and was vice chair of the society's recent report on the future of mathematics education. He was an impact assessor for the education sub-panel in the 2021 REF. He is a visiting professor in the Department of Education at King's College, London. He was awarded the CBE in 2013, for services to education.

Nick Johnson has been the CEO at BERA since April 2012, leading the organisation through a decade of growth, renewal and increasing influence. Nick has also steered BERA through several major initiatives that have shaped the national research landscape. These include the *BERA-RSA Inquiry into Research and Teacher Education* (2014), and *Education: The State of the Discipline* (2023). Prior to joining BERA, Nick held senior positions across public policy and the voluntary sectors. He has advised government at national and local levels and worked with organisations such as Chatham House, the Local Government Association and Ofwat. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, chair of governors at his local school and a former trustee of Young Citizens.

Vivienne Baumfield is Professor Emerita of Professional Learning in the Graduate School of Education, Exeter University, and co-leader of the Centre for Research in Professional Learning. She is interested in the interaction of research, policy and practice when university-based researchers work with practitioners in the creation and translation of knowledge across contexts. This interest is linked to the wider issue of understanding the relationship between theory and practice in professional learning and is grounded in a perspective derived from pragmatism. Her teaching and research examine international perspectives on the professional development of teachers and the impact of school-university partnerships as communities of pedagogical inquiry. Vivienne was co-opted onto BERA Council in 2016 and was chair of BERA's Publications Committee before serving as vice-president from 2020 to 2022, president from 2022 to 2024 and subsequently as vice-president once again.

Marlon Lee Moncrieffe (BERA president 2024 to 2026) is a former primary school leader and university research and knowledge exchange leader. As an educational researcher, he has worked extensively across the globe on multiple large-scale UKRI AHRC international and interdisciplinary research projects as the principal investigator. These have included partnerships with schools, universities, policymakers, NGOs and CSOs with the focus on developing notions of civic values and Ubuntu philosophy through curriculum design, art and cycling pedagogy with children and their teachers. In the UK, he is well known as a leading expert on decolonising and transforming curriculum knowledge for advancing anti-racism in education. With this, he has shared research evidence with UK parliament committees and led training for educational networks and learned societies. Marlon is a UCI world cycling champion and a *Sunday Times* sports book of the year award-winning author. He is a Fellow of the Chartered College of Teaching and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Appendix B: Who we consulted

Panel members are grateful to the following who so generously gave their time to answer our questions and to engage in dialogue with us about education research. We used the aims of the panel's work as our agenda in these interviews, and we gained many insights. While we do draw on what we learned during these interviews, we would like to stress that the report does not attempt to *represent* the views of those who kindly agreed to be interviewed, nor the views of the organisations with whom they are associated.

- Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education, Westminster
- Christopher Chapman, Professor of Educational Policy and Practice, University of Glasgow
- Mike Coldwell, Professor & Director of Research, Faculty of Health and Education, Manchester Metropolitan University
- Rita Gardner CBE, Chief Executive, Academy of Social Sciences
- Emma Gordon, Director of Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK), Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
- Josh Hillman, Director of Education, Nuffield Foundation
- Ewart Keep, Professor of Education, Training and Skills, University of Oxford
- Molly Morgan Jones, Director of Policy, British Academy
- Baroness Morris of Yardley, House of Lords
- Shahid Omer, Director of Policy, Universities UK
- Dame Alison Peacock, Chief Executive, Chartered College of Teaching
- Michael Reiss, Professor of Science Education, Institute of Education, University College London
- Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
- Damien Smith, Deputy Director of Research, Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
- David Sweeney CBE, Professor of Research Policy, University of Birmingham
- Joanna Thornborough, Senior Policy Adviser HE and Research, British Academy
- Allen Thurston, Professor, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast
- Anna Vignoles CBE, Director, Leverhulme Trust
- Russell Viner, Chief Scientific Adviser, Department for Education
- Carole Willis, Chief Executive, National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)
- Emily Yeomans, Co-CEO, Education Endowment Foundation

Appendix C: Methods & ways of working

C1 SOURCES & METHODS

The expert panel drew upon four principal sources:

1. Reports and online datasets on education research and its ecosystem, published and/or commissioned during the last decade or so by organisations including: the Royal Society and British Academy; the National Audit Office; research funders including UKRI; the four HE funding bodies; AcSS. These included:
   a. both public domain and bespoke Jisc/HESA datasets on staff and income related to education research in UK HEIs
   b. data from REF submissions and outcomes.
2. Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders occupying prominent positions in the domains of policy, funding, research or research use in one or more of the four UK nations.
3. A range of published sources on the nature of research in education and a metanarrative review of the broader relationship between research, policy and practice, much of which was conducted as part of the ESRC Education Research Programme (ES/W004917/1).
4. Panel members' experiences, spanning: leadership in research, practice and policy settings; funding; research-policy and research-practice relationships; the design and conduct of original research and evaluation; research quality assessment; knowledge exchange.

Feedback on process and emergent findings was collected from BERA Council members at an AGM (November 2024) and council awayday (May 2025), and from BERA's Leadership Committee (September 2025). Views on the panel's early work were also collected from some of the wider membership during the BERA Annual Conference (September 2024).

C2 HOW THE PANEL WORKED

Panel members worked entirely *pro bono publico*. They met 14 times between March 2024 and October 2025. The earliest meetings focused on refining aims and securing ethical approval from a research ethics committee for the conduct of the interviews (Cardiff University SREC 597, 4 July 2024). The panel then identified and discussed key published sources and potential interviewees, arriving at collective decisions. Invitation letters included an information and consent document, the aims of the panel's work, and advance notice of indicative questions. Twenty-four individuals were invited for interviews, and three declined. A total of 21 interviews were conducted by panel members between August 2024 and January 2025 (see Appendix B). Interviews were either in-person or online and were between 45 minutes and one hour in length. They were recorded and transcriptions were sent to interviewees with an invitation to comment and to annotate text to signal where an interviewee preferred any specific content to be entirely 'off the record'. The panel shared and discussed transcriptions to identify material of most relevance to its aims and to compare the views and experiences in each — first across all our interviews, and second with other reports or opinions on the challenges and opportunities facing education research.

Panel members also made several specific enquiries to other individuals and organisations to seek information or clarification.

As BERA is a constituent social science society of AcSS, the panel was able to draw on recent AcSS analysis of data on research income as recorded in HESA returns. It also made use of those summaries of HESA data that were

already online and in the public domain. In addition, and on behalf of the panel, in April 2025 BERA requested a small bespoke dataset from Jisc in respect of UK HE providers and the numbers of 'education' and 'continuing education' staff (FTE) in each who are on 'research only' and 'teaching and research' contracts for the years spanning 2019–20 to 2023–24.

BERA appointed Obiageri Bridget Azubuike as a part-time research assistant to support the panel's work from May to November 2024. Bridget's work included assembling background information from funding organisation websites and conducting an analysis of funding sources mentioned in REF 2021 environment statements, assisted by ChatGPT. Bridget also developed our analysis of changes in research funding over time and co-authored the working paper entitled *The volume, value and composition of investment in education research* (James & Azubuike, 2026) which is available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/bera-expert-panel-report-and-working-paper

The panel made use of two online tools:

1. The UKRI Gateway to Publicly Funded Research and Innovation was used to try to gain an overview of trends in current and recent ESRC-funded education research. We used the supplied filters to search for ESRC-funded research grants and fellowships in the fields of education, sociology of education, education and school, education policy and psychology of education. This produced a list of 851 items in the period 2006 to 2024. We then focused on awards commencing in the eight years 2017 to 2024, and most closely on the last four of these years.

2. An interactive database tool developed by the Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science from its study (commissioned jointly by the British Academy and AcSS) of impact in the humanities and social sciences (see Wagner et al., 2024). We found this especially helpful for looking at mentions of who funded underpinning research.

Panel members made all key decisions together and worked collaboratively to produce the report. The report does not represent a unanimous agreement: rather, its analyses and interpretations reflect areas where there is a reasonable – and often strong – degree of consensus.

Appendix D: REF 2021 indications of quality of education research in UK universities

Education is one of the 12 social science disciplines assessed in the UK REF. The last two exercises were in 2014 and 2021. Between these, education submissions increased in number (from 75 to 83 institutions) and there was a 47 per cent increase in the number of researchers included (from 1,442 to 2,168 FTE).

REF 2021 demonstrated that the quality of education research is high and had risen in recent years. Almost 30 per cent of education research outputs submitted gained the top score (that is, they were assessed as 'world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour', up from 21.7 per cent in REF 2014). Education research impact was well ahead of the average across the social sciences, with over 51 per cent of it gaining the top score ('impact that is outstanding in terms of significance and reach') again marking a significant rise in quality (from just under 43 per cent in REF 2014).

A recent study (Wagner et al., 2024) carried out by the Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science at the University of Oxford used REF 2021 impact case studies to assess the impact of SHAPE disciplines[1] on the wellbeing of society, culture and the economy. Headline findings include: the extensive impact of SHAPE research on 'virtually all scientific disciplines and realms including technological, industrial, health and environmental'; the high interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity of both the research and the impact; the UK-located nature of most impact but also the global reach of much of it; the high incidence of UKRI funding underpinning the research that led to the impact. The study also produced an interactive dashboard[2] that anyone can use to examine the dataset. Here we can see that 66 of the REF 2021 impact case studies can be clustered under the heading 'education and inequality'. The 10 largest funders of the research work underpinning these were ESRC (21), Nuffield Foundation (4), AHRC (4), Sutton Trust (4), Department for Education and Skills (4), British Academy (3), Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (3), Scottish Government (3) and Department for International Development (3).

The REF exercise also demonstrated that education research addresses a wide range of important issues, that it is fundamentally interdisciplinary, and that it embraces enormous substantive and methodological breadth in accordance with the diversity of research questions with which it is concerned. The education REF sub-panel noted that there was no simple hierarchy of quality across the methods and approaches used. It also noted that the highest quality outputs '...demonstrated their originality, significance and rigour in diverse ways'. These '...included qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies...[with] no strong association between research excellence and particular methods or approaches' (REF, 2022, para. 3.2).

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1 SHAPE refers to social sciences, humanities and the arts for people and the economy.
2 See: shape-impact.co.uk

However, as is the case with all disciplines, there is a considerable volume of university-based research that is not recorded in REF, or which is only represented indirectly. HEIs must choose a limited cross-section of outputs and impact case studies for their submissions, and many go to great lengths to select those they feel are likely to score highest against REF criteria.

Not all staff with research in their contracts were represented in submissions to the REF, and table D1 shows a simple analysis of this in relation to education. A comparison of staff numbers represented in education REF submissions with research active staff recorded in HESA data for the nearest relevant academic year suggests that just under half (48 per cent) were submitted. This is higher than the equivalent figure of 27 per cent for REF 2014. However, given that REF 2021 sought to reduce institutional selectivity and to align research assessment more closely with contracts, 48 per cent appears to be rather a low proportion. In part it is likely to reflect institutional strategies that make use of the considerable flexibility in how research and researchers are placed in submissions. Additionally, the REF definition of 'research active' required a certain level of independence, so some research active staff would not have been included in submissions. The figure may also reflect that some institutions revised contracts to 'teaching-only' in respect of some staff whose roles had previously included research.

Table D1
FTE education research active staff and REF: UK HEIs

	2014 (a)	2021
Institutions with research active staff (HESA data)	109	115 (b)
Number of REF institutional submissions	76	83
Total FTE academic staff in education and continuing education with research in contract (HESA)	5,255	4,475 (b)
FTE researchers in REF submissions	1,442	2,168
REF-submitted staff as a proportion of academic staff with research in contract	27%	48%

Source: (a) Figures in this column are taken from Mills et al., 2017. (b) These figures refer to HESA 'education' and 'continuing education' cost centres for 2019–20, the nearest relevant academic year at the time of REF submissions. They include three institutions listed as having only one staff member as research active in education.