TOWARDS NEW STRATEGIC INITIATIVES FOR RESEARCH CAPACITY IN EDUCATION: A DISCUSSION PAPER

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1. Introduction

The present paper contributes to the consultation process on capacity in educational research which ESRC has initiated though Town Meetings and other forms of liaison. At the heart of the paper is an attempt to clarify goals and responsibilities in the field. This is seen as a precondition for the generation of more strategic proposals. An outline of ideas for one such initiative, incorporating suggestions from previous parts of the consultation sequence, is then provided.

It is hoped that the paper may lead towards a more concise propositional paper for ESRC's Training and Development Board - and an initial outline of such a proposal is appended (see, for example, the diagram on p10 for an overview). It is recognised that developments of the sort envisaged here would need extensive tailoring for each part of the UK.

The paper is in five parts. This introduction leads on to a contextual review. The third and fourth sections are perhaps the most important in focusing on the goals, responsibilities and provision associated with what is offered as two major goals of educational research and enquiry. The final section considers the management of synergies between such goals and provision.

As a taster of the argument, in the broadest sense, two major goals of educational research and enquiry are taken to be:

1. Enhancing educational outcomes through the improvement of practice
2. Developing new knowledge and understanding about education

Of course these goals are related, and each should inform the other. Indeed, each is weakened if it fails to engage with insights derived from the other. However, in terms of the forms of contemporary social organisation and practices through which these goals are pursued in the UK, the view taken here is that these foci of activity are becoming increasingly distinct. The first is the primary realm of professional reflection and enquiry, tends to be grounded in the concerns of particular educational sectors and, in that it is connected to the quality of educational provision, is a core responsibility of sectoral agencies in each country of the UK. The second is the primary realm of social science, draws on theory and methods across sectors and is the core business of ESRC and research-intensive university departments across the UK and internationally. Both contribute, together with many other influences, to policy making and thus to the development of education systems as a whole.

For many years, enlightened educationalists have sought to integrate these activities and there is much to be said for this stance in principle. However, the contention of this paper is that, in present circumstances, the balance of advantage for the medium-term period post-2008 is to think very clearly about the particular needs of each. Without such clarity, capacity building in education is likely to be somewhat muddled and ineffective.

2. Contextual review

The context facing education research is becoming well known. However, some basic points are:

a. ESRC's Demographic review raised matters of *scale, focus* and *age profile:*
   - Total education staff in HE are over 5000 (HESA data) but only 2000 were 'research active' in RAE 2001 terms. The primary expertise of many lies in teacher education and professional practice.
   - Education is a major 'importer' of expertise from other social science and humanities disciplines.
   - Education academics are a significantly aging population, with over 70% of staff aged over 45.

b. The *quality* of educational research has been challenged in the past, and will certainly be challenged again. However, it can be argued that the quality of the best is now comparable to that in other social science fields. Commitment to evidence-informed policy and practice underpins demand for high quality research.

c. The RAE 2008 is expected to continue the process of *research differentiation* between HE institutions. It is possible that significant funding for high quality social science research will be concentrated in a smaller number of institutions - perhaps a dozen. There may be an uneven distribution of these institutions within the UK.

d. The *investments* in capacity development which were made by HEFCE and others in TLRP and by the Scottish Executive and Funding Council in AERS are expected to finish in December 2008. In both cases, it can be argued that significant opportunities have been provided and taken. There are expected to be some valuable legacy resources from these initiatives - but overall strategic follow-through has yet to be determined.

e. Education as a field of research and enquiry has *broadened* significantly in recent years, and it is no longer primarily about school education. Children's services, early years, post-16, FE, HE, adult, workplace, community and lifelong education each provide a focus for activity - particularly in relation to the improvement of policy and practice.

f. The range of active *stakeholders* in educational research activity has increased in recent years, reflecting the importance of education in economic, social and cultural affairs, the broadening of fields of application and UK devolution. However, the field is characterised by poor coordination.

g. We need to be realistic about funding of future initiatives. All funders have to address their core missions and to justify expenditure with clear performance-related evidence. Proposals for investments in education research and enquiry must reflect this.

Holding these contextual factors in mind, the paper moves on to discuss provision in respect of each major goal.

3. Goals, responsibilities and provision to enhance educational outcomes through the improvement of practice

Goals

The capacity of teacher enquiry and forms of reflective practice to enhance the quality of professional judgement and classroom practice has been demonstrated for many years in education - influenced, in particular, by the example of Laurence Stenhouse. Additionally however, in professions and forms of practical action well beyond teaching, we have the rationale and examples offered by John Dewey and Donald Schon. The insights are enriched further, from a quite different direction, by contemporary work on expertise. There seems to be little doubt that the development of expertise in any field depends on high levels of conscious, self-aware practice, problem solving and refinement. The result of this is a growth in both differentiated understanding and implementation skills.

Contemporary challenges to educational provision in all sectors, reflecting diversity, globalisation and social, economic and cultural imperatives, also requires high levels of flexibility. From adult, higher, further, school and pre-school, tutors, lecturers, teachers and carers must respond to new needs and circumstances if they are to offer the best provision for the learners in their care and thus maximise learning outcomes.

Professional enquiry is thus both proven and appropriate as a foundation for quality and responsiveness. For this reason, government agencies and other providers in all sectors are working towards ways of supporting such forms of professional development. Indeed, it is increasingly recognised that the publication of standards and other protocols is not enough. It is also necessary to provide practical support for scholarship and professional enquiry to improve practice.

Responsibility

Responsibility for provision to support the development of professional expertise in each sector should primarily rest with the funding and regulating agencies for such sectors within each country.

One of the reasons for a relative lack of continuity and slow emergence of an established infrastructure for professional development is that it has significant financial implications. The scale of the workforce in education is huge, even when it is considered in the distinct sectoral parts through which it is organised.

Notwithstanding such factors, there is a need to build a much more consistent infrastructure for professional development across all sectors, based on the application of common principles about professional learning and expertise. Although such important work will be of interest to ESRC and complementary to its own provision, scholarship, professional enquiry and development is *not* the core business of the research council even in this applied field.

Provision

Despite the best efforts of many, practical support for pedagogic enquiry has, hitherto been rather patchy. Thus, recently for English schools we have had Best Practice Research Scholarships and Networked Learning Communities and this direction is also

indicated by the new TDA standards. In Scotland the Chartered Teachers Scheme provides an interesting case. In Wales, the GTC has run a programme of awards for pedagogic innovation - and, indeed, each of the GTCs makes a significant commitment in principle to the role of research in professional development. Across the UK, there have been many initiatives by local authorities - though there are also others which are less committed. In post-16 education, LSRN flourished for a while and QIA are now beginning to explore new provision. In higher education, SRHE encourage pedagogic research and the HEA has funded a series of small-scale projects, as well as the education subject centre, ESCALATE. UCET's research committee regularly discusses such opportunities and the ways in which members help to develop and exploit them - whilst they last.

On the other hand, the new TDA standards set out expected capabilities of teachers at all stages of a career - including the growing awareness, use and production of evidence about outcomes and processes in teaching and learning. The BERA/SRHE proposal, summarised by Pamela Munn, made four proposals which seem to be of particular relevance to this primary goal. It suggested:

2a. Development of an appropriate `research training element' within undergraduate programmes of ITE and in PGCE courses or their equivalent is of foundational importance for long-term teacher development;

2b. The on-line materials being produced by TLRP and AERS should be supported as a way of supporting both student-teacher and ITE staff in practice-based enquiry;

2c. The `Meetings of Minds' fellowship scheme pioneered by AERS and TLRP should be preserved to offer high quality mentoring to colleagues with research potential in less research intensive HEIs;

2d. A junior research career fellowship scheme should be funded to target mid-career practitioners switching to teacher education roles in higher education - a suggestion which was later expanded to include the needs of academics in HEIs wishing to conduct pedagogic research in their subject area.

The Teacher Education Advisory Group of Universities UK has recently consulted with HEFCE and others on a New Blood Scheme for HEI Schools of Education. This builds on a TDA initiative reflecting its concern about the aging workforce in teacher training in HEIs, the sustainability of subject knowledge expertise and the quality of practice-based research more generally. The proposal is to create 150 lectureships for each of three years with the £81m total cost shared between HEIs and their school partners and the TDA and other funding bodies (subject to a TDA bid to DfES under the Comprehensive Spending Review).

This sort of provision will undoubtedly be of considerable interest to organisations such as BERA, SRHE, UCET, LSDA and the HEA.

In the period following RAE 2008, willingness to cooperate on activities of this sort among institutions with a high commitment to professional education but weaker research infrastructures may be considerable - if it is appropriately facilitated and supported.

4. Goals, responsibilities and provision for social scientific development of new knowledge and understanding about education

Goals
The case for high quality and relevant research in the contemporary world barely needs rehearsal in an era which aspires to evidence-informed policy and practice.

The age profile signaled by the Demographic Review alerts us to the fact that we need to significantly increase the number of younger and new researchers in education with high level social science skills and understanding. This is problem of quantity as much as quality. As in almost all areas of social science, there is also likely to be a particular shortage of researchers with quantitative skills. If we do not overcome these projected shortages, there is a real risk that the aspiration for evidence-informed policy and practice will be impossible to achieve in education.

Responsibility
Responsibility for strategic leadership to ensure the development of high quality social scientific research on education across all sectors should primarily rest with the ESRC as the major UK-wide funder of independent social science.

This is ESRC's core business, working with partners such as UK government departments, higher education funding councils and HEIs themselves. ESRC's limited resources should be focused on the development of expertise for the social scientific study of education. The scale is far smaller than for the improvement of practice - with only some 2000 `research active' staff entered in the 2001 RAE. Whilst this figure is almost certain to fall in 2008 submissions, there is likely to be a future need for greater provision for researchers from other disciplines who come to work in the field of education.

In recent years, AERS and TLRP have created many opportunities for colleagues to gain experience of large networks and projects. Their strategies aspire to embed development in the social practices of the community – though there is more explicit institutional engagement in Scotland. In Wales and Northern Ireland there is considerable awareness of the challenge facing the field – though formulating sustainable strategies has proved difficult. In principle however, it certainly seems appropriate that key higher education institutions should be take responsibility for actively creating and sustaining capacity building infrastructures for the communities which they serve.

We might thus have ESRC providing strategic leadership, funding councils and others contributing resources, and selected HEIs taking responsibility for provision in defined UK areas or in respect of particular educational themes.

Provision
Three forms of provision are highlighted below: fellowships, higher degree studentships and a UK network.

Fellowships: In their recent paper, BERA/SRHE proposed the creation of Junior Research Career Fellowships for mid-career professionals switching from professional practice in education to a career in higher education and for HE staff wishing to focus on the study of pedagogy. In my opinion, the laudable objectives as stated in the paper

relate primarily to the quality of teaching and learning in ITT and HE generally, and might therefore, on earlier arguments, be seen as the responsibility of the TDA or HEA. However, a scheme modeled on the RCUK Academic Fellowships may be more appropriate for the development of social science capacity per se. Five year funding of £25k pa 'provides a contract researcher with a more attractive and stable path into academia' and leads to a permanent position at the participating HEI.

Higher degree studentships: Additionally, in the earlier BERA paper submitted by John Furlong, the Association quite properly asked for current levels of financial support for higher degree studentships to be maintained.

A UK network: ESRC has a small but growing portfolio of strategic initiatives designed to support and develop capacity in vulnerable fields of UK national interest, with that of Advanced Quantitative Methods being a primary example. The latter is establishing a linked network of UK-wide centres of excellence through which the commitment and expertise of participating HEIs can be enlisted to a common purpose. Should education follow this example?

Following the major funding periods of TLRP and AERS, a UK-wide linked network could provide a way of recognising both the progress which has been made and the emerging challenges which the field faces. Rather than rely on a single centre, the strategy proposes to engage institutions in a structure of mutual and complementary support. Additionally, if required, the participating institutions could be selected to cover a range of strategically important educational themes.

An RAE-assessed quality threshold would be a likely condition for eligibility to apply to join a network for the development of social scientific research capacity in education. So too would be a commitment to collaborate on capacity building activities within the network and, where appropriate, beyond it. Selection could be managed through an open bidding process with each institution indicating how it would contribute to the overarching aims of the initiative.

Prior to establishment, there would also need to be a more formal evaluation of the current strengths and weaknesses of the field in methodological terms - as there was when TLRP's capacity building provision was initiated. At that point, the first 'particular priority' was: 'the development of skills in the design, conduct and management of quantitative studies, including experimental, quasi-experimental and survey techniques, capable of evaluating the effects of teaching and learning upon learners' attainment across various contexts'. There were also priorities on the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, on inter-disciplinarity and on the transformation of research-based knowledge to enhance impact. User engagement in research is another possible theme, as is the value of specific disciplinary study. A new evaluation could be drawn from the work of the new Strategic Forum for Research on Education, thus benefiting from the rigour of the OECD framework which structures that organisation.

Within the network, each collaborating partner might be expected to:

- Provide a medium-term development plan in relation to their contribution to the 'particular priorities' which have been identified for the field as a whole, and subsequently to provide reports on, and updates to, this plan.

- Offer one or more particular areas of exceptional theoretical or methodological expertise, so that the network as whole embraced a range of approaches, fit for addressing a wide range of research questions.

- Develop expertise and a portfolio of work in relation to particular substantive themes.

- Actively engage with ESRC's NCRM, the RDI and other provision across the social sciences as a whole.

- Be accredited for ESRC research training and offer appropriate Masters, EdD and PhD provision.

- Provide systematic, focused and progressive career development support for all contract research and other academic staff with particular reference to research skills and opportunities for advanced study.

- Welcome and recognise staff and higher degree students from education departments in `Associated HEIs' - institutions beyond the network, perhaps with relatively weak research infrastructures - and provide quantified services such as seminars, conferences, specialist library facilities and support for pedagogic research and scholarship as negotiated.

- Contribute specialist expertise to public-domain, web-based research resources for capacity building in educational research and enquiry, building on the existing work of TLRP, AERS and others as appropriate.

- Offer expertise for a `Meetings of Minds' Fellowship scheme, or similar, for the support of emerging researchers beyond research intensive institutions.

- Establish Executive and Advisory Groups, with the former providing for clear leadership and accountability and the latter including provision for the representation of views from higher degree students, junior CRS, colleagues across selected social sciences, Associated HEIs and other appropriate groups.

In facilitating this model, ESRC would take responsibility for strategic and conceptual leadership, assembling the funding consortium in each UK country, and (as appropriate for each country) managing the selection, progress and evaluation of participating institutions. Depending on future decisions, it might be possible to build on the infrastructures already established by AERS and TLRP.

In summary, ESRC could be asked to:

3a Fund a fellowship scheme designed to draw new social science researchers into education research (similar to the RCUK Academic Fellowship scheme);

3b Maintain current levels of support for higher degree studentships;

3c Lead the formation of a UK-wide network of institutions for the development of capacity in educational research.

5. Collaboration and synergy between these elements

This paper argues for clarity in goals, responsibilities and provision. In so doing, it juxtaposes various forms of professional enquiry into practice with the social scientific study of education. This argument is not intended to diminish either. They are both essential to the future development of knowledge, understanding and policy.

Fortunately, we already have a number of institutions which are dedicated to exploiting such synergies. The research associations, BERA, SERA, SRHE, SCUTREA, UCET, etc draw their membership from a wide range of practitioners in schools, further, higher and adult education and might see themselves as having a key role in maximising collaboration and synergy between these approaches. Similarly, charitable foundations such as Nuffield, Esmee Fairbairn and CfBT are particularly committed to the application of social science and are likely to continue to provide a bridging role.

The field of policy-making can be seen as a third area of activity which this discussion paper does not really explore. In addition to political considerations, policy is quite properly informed by social scientific evidence and practice-based knowledge– and thus by both of the strands of provision which are discussed above. The professionalisation of review processes and evolution of evidence portals, databases and websites is beginning to create an infrastructure to support policy-making, and I would again argue that an explicit focus on this goal would be helpful for future provision – but that is for another occasion.

This paper attempts to provide a rationale behind proposals which might be put to ESRC and other agencies. It is not a proposal in itself. However, a table hinting at concrete proposals to achieve more comprehensive coverage for is appended.

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APPENDIX: TOWARDS A PROPOSAL TO ESRC

An overview of existing and proposed provision

Career stage or institutional circumstance	***Non-ESRC provision***	***Direct ESRC provision***	***Indirect ESRC provision via an Ed Res Network***
Under-graduate	Under-graduate research training elements within ITE and PGCE courses		
Post-graduate	Practitioner enquiry as a central element of continuing professional development	Research studentships (existing provision)	On-line materials for developing research expertise (existing TLRP resource)
Post-doctoral or early career		Post-doctoral fellowship (existing scheme)	Career development for CRS Meetings of Minds fellowships (existing TLRP scheme) On-line materials for developing research expertise
Early or mid-career researcher making transition to education		Academic fellowship scheme (new provision suggested)	
Early or mid-career practitioner making transition to academe	New Blood lectureships Junior research career fellowships		On-line materials for developing research expertise
Staff in Associated HEIs			Seminars, conferences, library facilities, support for research and scholarship On-line materials for developing research expertise
Established researchers developing their expertise		RDI NCRM and nodes Professorial Fellowships (all existing provision)	Emphasis on methodological priorities
New specialist knowledge generation			Focus on particular, strategically selected substantive themes