

REPORT

Educational Research: what strategies for development in the European Research Area?

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This is a report of the *European Educational Research Journal* Roundtable that sought to describe what national educational research programmes are doing, how they are working together, and how they might contribute to the developing European Educational Research Space.

The Roundtable was an opportunity for one large consortium of national programmes to explain their intentions and create an opportunity for dialogue. Researchers from six national research programmes (United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Norway and France) have been working closely to develop a cooperative decision-making system; web-based knowledge-sharing; cooperative analyses of best practice; joint examination of common policy problems and opportunities; and pilot implementation of new approaches to research training and dissemination. The discussion, chaired by Martin Lawn (*EERJ* Editor), was introduced by short contributions from Andrew Pollard (University of Cambridge), Kirsti Klette (University of Oslo) and Hannele Niemi (University of Helsinki). A response was given by Filip Dochy (University of Leuven), President of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI).

Andrew Pollard posed the question 'how can new educational knowledge be created and applied in contemporary European societies?' There is a strategic dilemma as to whether progress is best achieved through communities of scholars or through relying on a degree of central planning, or it may be that it is possible to manage collaboration so as to achieve the best of both worlds. There are established academic communities and European networks (EERA and EARLI), but collaboration is supported largely through voluntary effort and a serendipitous accumulation of knowledge. The European Commission has supported social science research collaboration with an educational dimension, but one view expressed by a European Commission official was that educational research in Europe was seen as fragmented and compartmentalised. Hence one challenge for the European educational research community is whether it is able to appear more united.

One contribution to meeting this challenge could come from collaboration between coordinated national educational research programmes. One impetus for increased collaboration comes from the recognition by national research councils of the need to internationalise their research as a strategic objective. As a consequence there has been increased bilateral and multilateral cooperation in educational research. One example of this has been the attempt to link the national educational research development strategies of Finland, France, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Collaboration between national research programmes has included cross-national involvement in programme design; project evaluation; design and implementation of comparative projects; project and programme evaluation; inter-project collaboration; participation in thematic and methodological workshops and symposia; researcher exchanges; participation in each other's national conferences; and the development of a common website.

This collaboration between relatively well-funded national programmes also holds out the prospect that they could develop a dialogue with European professional associations, European institutions and researchers engaged either in European projects or national projects where a country does not have a coordinated national programme. The national programmes, while seeking deeper forms of scientific cooperation, have also combined with funding bodies from a range of other countries in an ERA-NET bid which, if successful, would broaden collaboration, by including partners from Italy, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Finland, Spain and Austria.

In order to give participants a flavour of what was going on within the national programmes of educational research, presentations were given about the programmes in Finland, Norway and the United Kingdom.

Hannele Niemi, the scientific director of the Finnish *'Life as Learning'* LEARN programme, outlined the key features of the LEARN programme. It is funded by the Academy of Finland, will run from 2002 to 2006, and has a budget of EUR 5.1 million. The aims of the research programme are to:

- develop a new research culture and new research partnerships;
- commission interdisciplinary and international research projects around the problems of learning;
- facilitate lifelong and life-wide learning in order to avoid new kinds of social exclusion;
- develop an interdisciplinary research base for developing teaching and learning in different educational and working-life contexts; and
- to anticipate future learning needs from the point of view of society, culture and the individual.

Achievement of these aims will involve the redefinition and examination of the concept of learning; the social and cultural contexts of learning; knowledge creation; working environments; and new teachership. Seventeen proposals were funded, including three consortia, making an overall total of 21 projects. The strengths of the LEARN programme were seen as the cross-boundary cooperation between institutional and non-institutional learning environments; the facilitation of multidisciplinary approaches (between education, psychology, sociology, technology, engineering, neurology and economics); establishing joint projects between universities; and creating new tools that could help practitioners in managing changing contexts or changing practices.

The programme focuses upon a wide range of contexts for learning in working life, educational institutions, non-formal learning settings and virtual learning environments. Learning is approached from both individual and collaborative perspectives and attention is given to development of research methodologies aimed at improving understanding of learning processes. The projects cover different age levels and transition periods across the life course.

Some possible limitations of the LEARN programme are that some research areas are underrepresented. For example, there is relatively little emphasis given to the connections between learning outcomes and processes; the connections between individual processes and societal structures; conceptual and philosophical analysis; and value analysis. The programme will, however, generate new knowledge of learning processes at individual and collaborative levels; find out more about what are the meta-processes required to manage learning in changing structures and contexts of working life and educational institutions; and lead to greater visibility for issues of learning in the society. The programme facilitates international cooperation and will be organising a major international INTERLEARN Conference in Helsinki, 1-2 December 2005.

Kirsti Klette, Deputy Director, outlined the key features of the Norwegian *'Knowledge, education and learning'* programme that runs from 2003 through 2007. It is funded by the Norwegian Research Council for almost 10 million Euros and 13 projects have been commissioned. The programme builds in an explicit comparative perspective and builds on a strong tradition of cooperation with other Nordic countries. The programme focuses on the education and research system, as well as the learning taking place in the labour market and in society in general. The programme's aims are to enhance the level of competence in Norwegian educational research, contribute to the long-term development of knowledge about education and research, strengthen the knowledge base of Norwegian education policy and play a part in the public debate about the changing role of education and knowledge in society.

The programme has two main perspectives. One perspective deals with change and reorganisation, focusing upon changing conceptions about knowledge; changing organisational forms and new technology; and changing economic and social conditions. The second perspective

takes a comparative view of knowledge and education, hoping this will lead to a better understanding of key issues; a richer conceptual understanding; a shift in focus from nation building to internationalisation; and a better understanding of imported concepts. These perspectives are to inform and constitute the background for the three topics identified as research priorities:

- the interaction between the education system, home, workplace and voluntary sector as arenas for lifelong learning;
- leadership, organisation and management; and
- learning processes and areas of knowledge (in all fields).

The strategic priorities of the programme related to an increasing concentration of research expertise; support and commitment from applicants' institutions; development of integrated research groups; achieving a balance between depth and breadth, surveys and case studies, and thematic multidisciplinary and disciplinary groups. Internationalisation was facilitated through use of international reviewers; applications written in English; international debates used as frame of reference; a requirement that project leaders should document international networks; support for travel and stays abroad; and the specification of international publication as an aim and requirement.

Andrew Pollard, director of the *UK Teaching and Learning Research Programme*, outlined the key features of the programme. It is the largest education research programme ever funded in the United Kingdom, with a total budget equivalent to 44 million Euros. It was established in 1998 and will continue to 2008/09. TLRP is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the four government education departments for Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England, and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It is managed by ESRC, and from 2005 will be directed and coordinated from the Institute of Education, University of London.

As a key player in educational research throughout the United Kingdom, TLRP supports research activities designed to lead to significant improvements in outcomes for learners at all ages and stages in all sectors and contexts of education and training, including informal learning settings, throughout the United Kingdom. Learning outcomes are broadly conceived and include: the development of positive learner identities; the acquisition of qualifications; the acquisition of skill, understanding and bodies of knowledge; the development of attitudes and values relevant to a learning society.

TLRP funding supports research networks, large-scale research projects, training fellowships, thematic groups and research seminar series. Developing research capacity is also a key objective. Given the range of projects, the Programme as a whole investigates aspects of teaching and learning across the life course. This range makes possible cross-project analysis, including consideration of the ways in which teaching and learning is conceptualised in the fields of theory, policy, professional practice and popular culture.

The background to the development of TLRP includes a series of 'reforms' throughout the UK education system; a concern for economic competitiveness and social inclusion; aspirations for greater use of evidence-informed policy; and the formation of new alliances between researchers, practitioners and users. Of the 60 separate investments about 30 involve major projects, with funding of up to Euro 1.5m each, that often comprise large teams of researchers. Illustrations of the research questions tackled within the programme include the following:

Primary and early years education:

- Can pre-school play with new technologies enhance children's learning?
- What are the most effective forms of early years provision?

Secondary education:

- Does knowledge-exchange between parents and teachers improve pupil learning outcomes?
- How can group work in small schools be developed most effectively?
- Does the development of thinking skills enhance classroom performance?

Across school phases:

- How can children's mathematical understanding be enhanced?
- Does increased pupil consultation produce educational benefits?

- Does 'learning how to learn' enhance performance?
- Can social inclusion and pressure for performance be reconciled?
- Does evidence-based practice in science education improve outcomes?
- How can ICT support teaching to enhance pupil learning?

Further and post-16 education:

- How can community-based further education be best developed?
- What effects do organisational cultures have on learning?
- What are the effects of the everyday literacies which learners use in formal education?
- How does policy impact on teaching, learning and assessment?

Higher education:

- Could we improve student outcomes if we understood teaching and learning better?
- How do social and organisational factors affect student learning outcomes?
- What is the experience of disabled students at university?
- How is musical expertise developed?

Workplace learning:

- Can workplace cultures be developed to improve learning outcomes?
- How do workers understand and develop skills in new technologies?
- Can adults' basic skills be improved through workplace learning?

Continuing professional development and lifelong learning:

- How do new teachers learn in early professional development?
- How can professional agencies learn to work together to deliver public services?
- What is the role of vicarious learning in professional training?
- How do graduate professionals learn on-the-job?
- How does learning by individuals develop throughout the life course?

After the contributions from key players in national educational research programmes, **Filip Dochy** (University of Leuven), President of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI), was invited to make the first response. He pointed to the contradiction that policy-makers at all levels emphasised the pivotal role knowledge creation would play in future and yet no one wanted to spend money on educational research that could help realise a society in which knowledge and learning played a more central role. As educational researchers we have not been able to represent the considerable achievements of educational research in past decades (for example, in relation to the adoption of constructivist ideas, assessment, school leadership etc.) in a way that is convincing to policy-makers.

In order to represent educational research more effectively it may be helpful for EARLI and EERA to cooperate, particularly as their interests appeared complementary rather than competing, with EARLI having a narrower focus and ECER having a broader orientation. The educational research community needs to encourage greater cross-fertilisation between domains (both within and outside educational research) and to acknowledge the value of different disciplinary approaches. It is also important that educational research is not just policy-driven, there is a need for more fundamental and developmental research. Building networks and exchanging knowledge means that researchers have to make conscious attempts to broaden their horizons beyond national or regional boundaries.

The debate was then opened up to other contributors. It was pointed out that educational researchers needed to pay attention to the impact of outputs of research, not just seek to undertake research and generate output for impact. Another contributor pointed out that Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development educational research reviews had highlighted that the connections between research, development and practice were weak and that the evidence from educational research was often not robust enough to act to underpin policy and practice. This pointed to the value of meta-analyses in drawing together evidence in a convincing fashion. A final contributor thought it was less a question of making judgements about the quality of research, rather what was required was a dialogue about how research functions (going beyond a search simply for 'what works'). This would lead into a consideration of processes of knowledge transfer and could act to shift the debate towards issues around engagement of users in research and the transfer of ideas from research into policy and practice.

In summary, there appeared to be almost universal agreement that the educational research community needs to pay greater attention to internationalisation of research processes. To this end, the collaboration of national research programmes did offer one way of achieving this through progressive interaction between partners and their associated research communities. This was to be achieved through the development of web-based knowledge-sharing; cooperative analyses of best practice; joint examination of common policy problems and opportunities; and pilot implementation of new approaches to research training and dissemination. In this way the partnership could contribute to continuing transnational cooperation in educational research: an area of strategic importance for individual countries and for Europe as a whole. The partners are also committed to broadening their collaboration and see their involvement in ECER events as crucial in this respect.

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