

Executive summary

Across the OECD, enormous effort and investment has been made to reinforce the quality, production and use of education research in policy and practice. Despite this, using research systematically and at scale in education policy making and practice remains a challenge for many countries and systems. The OECD launched the *Strengthening the Impact of Education Research* project to respond to this challenge.

This report represents the first step in addressing the knowledge gap on what and how initiatives to increase research use work. It does this by bringing together leading experts who provide insights into recent research in the field and international experience gathered from both policy and practice, including from sectors other than education. In addition, the volume provides a first set of analyses of data collected from over 30 systems through an OECD policy survey. The analysis describes the mechanisms used to strengthen the impact of education research in policy and practice, and the levels of engagement of various – individual and institutional – actors in these processes. The report also maps the drivers of, and barriers to, using research in education policy and practice. While some promising practices are highlighted across the report, the primary focus at this stage is not to provide clear solutions. This initial mapping of structures and processes aimed at improving research use points to a number of knowledge gaps and directions for future work.

A diverse set of actors and mechanisms facilitate research use in countries; yet, important barriers to more systematic production and use continue to exist

A large number of organisations are active in producing research and facilitating its use in policy and practice across the OECD. The landscape is dominated by research organisations in many education systems while agencies with an explicit brokerage mission exist in about half of the systems. Countries have a number of mechanisms for facilitating research use, with projects encouraging interactions between the different actors being the most common. Countries also report various barriers to using research systematically in policy and practice. The lack of time to access and engage with research is a shared challenge. Barriers are commonly linked to the absence of appropriate structures and mechanisms although insufficient accessibility of research due to inappropriate or inconvenient formats means that user-friendliness is also a problem in many systems.

Co-producing research is a promising avenue but evidence is still weak on what good research-practice-policy engagement looks like

There is consensus that teachers' and policy makers' involvement in research can make research more relevant and reinforce its use. However, the nature of involvement matters for its impact. The different actors involved in research production should be equal partners in bringing their own unique knowledge to the table. Genuine curiosity, respect and active listening are necessary. But, though research co-production promises research that is more relevant and more readily used, it is far from being a mainstream instrument in education. And when research is co-produced, teachers, school leaders and policy makers

are often only involved in limited ways. More research is needed to understand how exactly engagement works in research co-production and what the necessary ingredients are for its success.

Conceptual development in the field of knowledge mobilisation has not yet translated into action

Conceptually, knowledge mobilisation has moved away from linear research transmission to a systems approach. There is now substantive evidence showing that the linear strategy of making research findings accessible and disseminating them to practitioners and policy makers is necessary but not sufficient for research uptake. Rather, it is important to build relationships between different communities through partnerships and networks. But simply connecting people is not enough. Agents are embedded in complex systems, and the whole system needs to be activated to establish connections among its various parts. To date, most knowledge mobilisation initiatives have not been able to realise the promise of a systems model.

Strategic leadership, and appropriate incentives and funding mechanisms are needed to enable a systems approach to research use

To activate the whole system for research co-production and use requires system-level coordination. At a minimum, three elements are necessary. *Strategic leadership* – both at the level of each initiative and at the level of the system – should be based on a well-developed theory of change. Practitioners, policy makers and researchers need *incentives* for engaging thoughtfully in and with research. Notably, traditional academic incentives are a major obstacle for researchers to engage with practitioners and policy makers more deeply. *Funding mechanisms* need to be aligned with the needs of high-quality research-policy-practice engagement. Funding needs to recognise the time it takes to create trusting relationships. It should also recognise the importance of capacity building, rewarding skills and incentivising outputs that serve the needs of research users and, ultimately, beneficiaries. Although local efforts aim to support teachers, school leaders and policy makers to use research and adapt it to their particular contexts, very few countries have a system-wide strategy. This can block local initiatives from scaling up and making a systemic impact.

There is immense potential for peer learning in this field if contexts, actors and sectors are more connected

Potential for peer learning is (at least) threefold. First, learning from other contexts: Discussions on the use of research in education tend to focus either on the context of policy or practice. Evidence-informed policy and practice have developed in parallel but developments have not been systematically translated from one context to the other. Second, learning from other countries: The diversity of the research production and use landscape provides fertile ground for sharing good and bad practices, and exploring what works and how. Third, learning from other sectors: Research and experience have accumulated in a number of sectors, including health, environment, agriculture and fields of social science. Learning more from these sectors could benefit education. Platforms for mutual learning will contribute to developing a more robust knowledge base in the field.

We need to better understand what works in research mobilisation for such initiatives to become evidence-based themselves

Research on “What works in what works” has become a vibrant field of study in recent years but it has not, as yet, yielded enough robust evidence. The systematic investigation and evaluation of existing efforts to reinforce research impact are critical to improving such efforts. Yet, such evaluations to date have been scarce. For research mobilisation initiatives to become evidence-informed themselves, we need to better understand what makes them successful in generating high-quality research and reinforcing their use. The next stage of the *Strengthening the Impact of Education Research* project will involve an in-depth investigation of research mobilisation initiatives to advance this knowledge base.



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