

## Political Control of Educational Research

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the tensions that sometimes arise between educational researchers and policy makers. The recent history of the relationship is described and it is suggested that part of the reason for current disenchantment (on both sides) is that the two groups approach research with different expectations and priorities. Two particular examples, one from the 1970s and one from 2011, are considered in some detail, to illustrate how issues of power and control can lead to the adoption of 'political' stances that lose sight of the potential value of research. It is suggested that while issues of funding are important, researchers need to be self-critical about the quality of their research output and to identify potential growth areas for future activity. At the same time, policy makers should be less concerned about the short-term 'public relations' aspects of research and more willing to think of the longer-term benefits of good research evidence, even if it sometimes causes political sensitivities.

### INTRODUCTION: RELATIONS BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHERS AND GOVERNMENT

The argument I wish to advance falls into three parts. The first is essentially scene-setting, and includes reference to issues that were raised at the 2011 conference of the Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA), as well as general observations about relations between researchers and government. Most of what I have to say relates specifically to Scotland but some of the themes are to be found in other contexts: the literature on the politics of educational research covers all parts of the UK and is increasingly international in character (see, e.g. Gorard, 2002; Whitty, 2006; Baez & Boyles, 2009; Gardner, 2011). The second part introduces an historical perspective, drawing attention to fluctuating relationships between policy makers and researchers, and illustrating the discussion with two examples, one from the 1970s, the other from the recent past. In the final part, I explore some of the implications for researchers, including the need for self-evaluation, and consider how they might best position themselves in difficult times.

At the 2011 SERA conference there were several expressions of concern about the state of educational research in Scotland, and in particular about official government attitudes to the work of researchers. It was noted at the Annual General Meeting that contact between SERA and the Scottish Government, which used to be good, had virtually ceased. The issue of engagement between government and the research community also featured in the SERA debate, in which I took part. And one of the papers presented at the conference, given by Ian Menter and Donald Christie, posed the question: 'Whither Scottish educational research?', advancing a strong case for a collaborative approach.

Following the conference, there was an extended feature in the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland (TESS)*, written by Henry Hepburn, entitled 'Mind the gap: the growing gulf between policy and research' (Hepburn, 2011). Several leading figures in Scottish education were quoted. Ian Menter expressed the frank view that the Scottish Government appeared to have no interest in funding high-level educational research. Fran Payne pointed out that no one from government had bothered to attend the conference and that she had counted only five invitations to tender on the Scottish Government website in the previous 18 months. One of these was for a project on cycle training – no doubt a worthy subject but hardly at the cutting edge of policy. Ross Deuchar, the outgoing SERA President

at that time, stated that there had been no formal meetings between SERA and Scottish Government for over three years - before that, twice yearly meetings had been the norm. Lorna Hamilton said that SERA's Research Newsletter was routinely copied to staff in Analytical Services within Scottish Government but no interest in it had been evinced.

The overall picture that emerged was extremely gloomy. On the one hand, researchers had formed the view that their work was not valued, that government looked elsewhere for evidence that might inform policy - e.g. to data gathered by the Analytical Services Division within the civil service or to private research consultancies. It was felt that the opportunity to develop a research strategy on a collaborative basis was being missed. On the other hand, government seemed to have become impatient with the research community, regarded some of the work done as having little relevance to current priorities, and did not appreciate the critical line taken by certain researchers.

In one respect at least, the situation appears to have improved slightly. George Head in his President's report for 2012 states that a useful meeting took place between SERA representatives and Audrey MacDougall of Scottish Government in June of 2012. It is good that contact has been restored though, given the current financial climate, it is unlikely that will be translated into major projects in the foreseeable future. Overall division of responsibility for educational research at national level has altered with the setting up of Education Scotland (ES) to combine the activities of the inspectorate and Learning and Teaching Scotland. The precise role of Education Scotland in relation to educational research is not yet clear though some indications of the direction of its thinking are beginning to emerge (see Acknowledgement).

Research within ES is seen as part of an overall 'knowledge management' strategy, which will 'translate' research into forms that are easily accessible to practitioners, and use it to analyse, reflect on and challenge current policy, as well as commissioning research. The intention is to establish a 'reference group', consisting of key stakeholders (including representatives of SERA, the wider academic community and local authorities), to help identify research priorities rather than simply impose a set of corporate objectives. However, there is likely to be a strong focus on research related to major initiatives, notably Curriculum for Excellence, and on research that can enhance understanding of pupil learning and classroom practice. There will be scope for both qualitative and quantitative work. The hope is that policy and practice will become much more 'evidence informed'. Ensuring that the findings of good research are implemented effectively is seen as particularly challenging, an example of the wider problem of managing change. Other areas likely to be of particular interest include the complex determinants of social disadvantage, the early years and educational leadership. The series of reports arising from the Growing Up in Scotland project are seen as good examples of the value of insights to be gained from well-conceived longitudinal studies (available at [www.growingupinScotland.org.uk](http://www.growingupinScotland.org.uk))

These plans are still at the aspirational stage and it is too early to judge what impact they will have, either within the operations of ES or, more importantly, on the educational system as a whole. ES is still undergoing a process of organisational and cultural change. Its relationship to Scottish Government means that its activities have to be clearly policy-related and this means its freedom to pursue lines of research will be to some extent constrained. However, the desire to establish good communication with potential research partners, who might have greater freedom, is to be welcomed. The real test will come some years hence when the record of both ES's 'in house' research and any externally commissioned research can be reviewed and evaluated.

It is important to recognise that the priorities of researchers and policy makers are not the same. There are always likely to be tensions between them and to expect complete harmony is unrealistic. Politicians generally hope for clear recommendations from research, preferably within a relatively short time scale. The date of the next election when they will have to account for successes and failures looms large in their minds. Moreover, they are impatient of too much complexity and seek closure on the subject under consideration. They are also naturally concerned about the cost implications and the resources that might be needed for implementation. Researchers, by contrast, are resistant to closure and often

want to go on interrogating their data beyond the point when a policy decision has to be taken. They are inclined to be sceptical of the public relations 'hype' which accompanies the launch of many policies, regarding it as an example of 'policy as spectacle' rather than the 'evidence-informed policy' which is said to be the ideal. Researchers enjoy complexity and are keen to draw attention to qualifications in their findings. This sometimes provokes a degree of irritation among policy makers who tend to be interested in headlines rather than footnotes.

One of the best accounts of the tensions between researchers and policy makers is by a Canadian, Ben Levin, who has spent half his career as a senior official in government working closely with politicians and civil servants, and the other half as a researcher and academic, viewing the processes at work from a different perspective (Levin, 2008). He states that governments often have limited control over the policy agenda: although they may have been elected on the strength of stated commitments, they are likely to be strongly influenced by external pressures, changing circumstances, unexpected events and crises. Beliefs are often more important than facts when it comes to dealing with problems and resolving issues. The timetable of parliamentary business means that politicians and officials rarely have enough time for the kind of extended analysis that researchers regard as essential. And in translating policies from conception to implementation, both people and systems matter: policies need able advocates but they also need to be developed and disseminated through effective bureaucratic structures. Levin's description of the forces at work is consistent with Stephen Ball's earlier account of educational policy making in England, which suggested that the policy process is rarely entirely rational and is quite often characterised by messy compromises and erratic management (Ball, 1990).

## **AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

One way of gaining further leverage on these issues is to introduce an historical dimension into the discussion. Much of current policy discourse is ahistorical in character, adopting a rather arrogant assumption that there is nothing we can learn from the past. The late G.H. Bantock once wrote a paper entitled 'The parochialism of the present', in which he deplored the narrowness of vision of much contemporary educational writing (Bantock, 1979). In particular, he complained that the loss of any sense of evolution in educational thinking meant that some practices were promoted as novel, when in fact they were not, while others failed to learn from the successes (and limitations) of earlier traditions. Since that article was published, history of education as a distinct field of study has virtually disappeared from most teacher education courses (certainly in Scotland) so the trend Bantock was criticising has, if anything, become more pronounced. A comparison of the 1977 Munn report and the 2004 report of the Curriculum Review Group (which initiated Curriculum for Excellence) would tend to bear this out (SED/CCC, 1977; Scottish Executive, 2004). Whereas the recommendations of the former were firmly grounded in the cumulative insights of psychological, sociological and philosophical research, those of the latter lacked any such conceptual basis. They were simply presented as the self-evident wisdom of experienced practitioners.

Despite this, for those who seek an understanding of the development of educational research in Scotland, there are a number of good sources. There are histories of the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) (Craigie, 1972; Powell, 2012) and of SERA (Nisbet, 2005). John Nisbet's earlier book *Pipers and Tunes* charts the development of educational research in the 1980s and early 1990s (Nisbet, 1995). And a short paper by Martin Lawn and Ian Deary in the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) Briefing series is also useful (Lawn & Deary, 2008).

What these accounts reveal is that there have been ups and downs in relationships between policy makers and researchers, including times when there has been good collaboration, often based on strong personal contacts between civil servants and the research community. These have occasionally provoked different forms of criticism: e.g., during the decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, when the Research and

Intelligence Unit within the Scottish Education Department was a powerful force, the inspectors heading it were sometimes accused of having gone native, of having lost sight of their bureaucratic responsibilities and bought into academic values and discourse to too great an extent (Nisbet, 2005: p. 25). At other times, those researchers who had benefitted from a steady flow of government contracts were sometimes accused of being too cosy with government, of being too willing to play up or tone down their conclusions in order to remain acceptable to the funders (see Humes, 1986). Tension between the two groups emerges as a recurring theme and can also be seen in more recent accounts (Humes, 2007; Brown, 2008; Christie & Menter, 2009). And for anyone who wants to look at Scottish developments in a UK context, a recent BERA/UCET paper offers a useful survey of key issues (BERA/UCET, 2012).

### Example 1

For my first example, however, I want to go back a bit further and draw on an account by Andrew McPherson contained in another very useful source – a collection of essays entitled *An Attitude of Mind* published in the nineteen-eighties and edited by the Director of SCRE at that time (Dockrell, 1984). Older delegates at the conference will be familiar with the name Andrew McPherson, who was the first Director of the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) at Edinburgh University, which in my view has a strong claim to be regarded as the unit which has produced the most interesting and influential educational research in Scotland in recent decades. Andrew McPherson and Charles Raab co-authored *Governing Education*, which won the Education Book of the Year award in 1988 (McPherson & Raab, 1988). It appeared two years after my own *Leadership Class in Scottish Education* which, I think it is fair to say, was both more polemical and less scholarly (Humes, 1986). Together, however, the two books helped to establish policy studies as a distinctive field within educational research in Scotland. They also tried to strip away the anonymity of policy makers, their preference to operate behind the scenes, out of the public eye: in both books politicians, senior civil servants and inspectors were identified and named. My favourite comment on the usual facelessness of bureaucrats comes from a splendid comic novel by the American writer, John Kennedy Toole: 'You can always tell employees of the government by the total vacancy which occupies the space where most other people have faces' (Toole, 2000).

The piece by Andrew McPherson which I wish to cite is entitled 'An episode in the control of research' (McPherson, 1984). It starts dramatically with a quotation from a government official: 'They are spilling blood in there'. The year was 1975 and government was rethinking its management of research expenditure. There was unease within parts of the administration about the way CES's activities were developing. McPherson and his colleagues were seeking to gain access to schools and local authorities to develop their surveys of school leavers which had previously been piloted with the help of funding from the then Scottish Education Department (SED). There was resistance within the SED. What were the reasons for this? The CES surveys were to be large-scale quantitative studies but they were to be collaborative - not only in the sense of involving schools and local authorities, but also in the sense of making the resulting data sets available to others and so broadening the constituency of informed opinion about what was happening in Scottish education. In other words, it was an attempt to make research more democratic and to open up access to the knowledge generated by research. For some within the SED, this raised issues of who had ownership of the research: if government was funding it, they argued, surely government should decide how it was to be disseminated. These are matters that still provoke debate about the politics of research: evident in the drafting and redrafting of reports of funded projects; in negotiation of agreed texts; in permission to publish results in academic journals; and in whether reports become public documents or are kept as internal to the sponsoring organisations.

There was another reason for SED caution. A separate study conducted by Andrew McPherson and a colleague Guy Neave - and later published under the title *The Scottish Sixth* (McPherson & Neave, 1976) - had been partly funded by the SED and, as was normal, a draft of the final report had been submitted to the department for comment. This clearly caused some official anxiety. A regular liaison meeting was cancelled at short notice and the researchers were invited to attend another meeting, led by inspectors, at which various concerns were expressed. The researchers were told that their study 'went far beyond the proper limits of educational research' (McPherson, 1984: p.117). McPherson does not elaborate on this but I suspect that part of the concern was that the study was not confined to the nuts and bolts of curriculum and assessment - territory that the inspectors might have felt fairly comfortable with - but included a much broader sociological approach to the purposes and functions of upper secondary education. What McPherson does say, however, is very interesting and revealing as is evident from this extract:

The chairman . . . concluded by saying that the tone of the report was 'unhelpful' adding 'need I say more?' Possibly he did not need to, for what may have been implied was then spelled out by one of his colleagues. Leading me by the elbow to one side as we were leaving the room he told me that I could 'write what I liked' but that 'I should not forget that Scotland was a small country'. I was left to ponder the several things that might mean. (ibid: p. 117)

I was reminded of this episode just a few years ago when I myself was taken aside by a member of the inspectorate after offering a few mild reflections at the end of a professional conference. I was told that 'I should be careful of criticising the inspectorate in public'. I used the episode as the basis of an article entitled 'Advice Rejected: a case of official misjudgement' (Humes, 2009).

Considerable pressure was put on McPherson and his colleagues to amend the text of *The Scottish Sixth*, the implication being that such cooperation might lead to greater willingness to support the school leavers' survey. The dispute had its farcical moments. At one stage McPherson was told that 'one opinion within the Department was that I was a communist intent on dismantling authority both through the collaborative model, and also through our proposal to evaluate the response of government and others to our attempt to establish the model.' (McPherson, 1984: p.118)

Two external events helped to break the impasse and restore a measure of common sense. Interestingly, both came from outside Scotland. First, *The Scottish Sixth* was accepted for publication by the National Foundation for Educational Research, most of whose work related to England and Wales. It is fair to say that when it was published a year later the book hardly created the political storm that some SED officials had feared. The second development was more important. The Educational Research Board of the then Social Science Research Council awarded CES a substantial grant for the collaborative research programme for four years. The SED, unwilling to appear obstructive in public, staged a tactical withdrawal, initially adopting a neutral stance towards CES's proposals, later deciding that a weak supportive stance would be more expedient.

Andrew McPherson's own conclusions are cautious and carefully circumscribed. He draws attention to the importance of what he calls 'plural institutional provision for the independence of research' (ibid: p.121). It is worth asking, in passing, how 'plural institutional provision' might be assured in an independent Scotland, where the outside pressures which helped to resolve CES's position might not be available. He also points out that it would be a mistake to see all SED officials and inspectors as uniformly oppressive. CES had its supporters within the department, particularly within the Research and Intelligence Unit. But it is also clear that what was driving many of the hostile attitudes was not so much concern about the quality of the proposed research as its possible political ramifications - not in the sense of *party* political but in terms of the politics of power, knowledge and democracy. The fear was that official narratives about Scottish education might become less persuasive if people outside the policy community had easy access to independent

research evidence. As we shall see, a desire to maintain official narratives and discount counter-narratives is a continuing feature of the way educational policy in Scotland is managed.

I have merely skimmed over the surface of this episode and McPherson's full account is well worth reading. It was a brave piece to write – we need more courage in educational research - and it provides a fascinating insight into the difficult territory that researchers often have to negotiate. Knowing when to take a stand on important matters of principle is vital. Researchers who capitulate too readily in the face of political pressure run the risk of becoming complicit in their own containment.

Nevertheless, sceptics may be inclined to say, 'That was a long time ago. Surely things are much better now.' Collaborative forms of research are now well established. It is easier to access the data on which many research findings are based. And, of course, there is the internet which makes communication and dissemination much quicker and easier. All that is true but conflict can still arise. My second example is more recent, from 2012, rather less dramatic but still revealing in terms of researcher/policy maker relations.

### *Example 2*

It concerns Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) which is what might be called a 'high stakes' policy. Many political and professional reputations within Scotland depend on it being perceived as reasonably successful. Indeed it can be argued that, in an age when international comparisons have become critically important, the reputation of Scottish education as a whole makes it imperative that the aspirations of CfE are seen to be achieved. In such a politically sensitive context, politicians and officials tend to want to hear good news and are not well-disposed to anything that might be construed as negative. Researchers have to be open to all the evidence, whether good, bad or inconclusive.

The research I want to highlight is work carried out by Mark Priestley and Sarah Minty at Stirling University. Priestley is a curriculum specialist, with strong interests in processes of change and teacher agency. He has published several articles on CfE, including one with me (Priestley & Humes, 2010), and has co-edited a book on CfE (Priestley & Biesta, 2013). His interest in curriculum is not narrowly academic: he has worked in schools and local authorities, contributing to CPD programmes designed to promote understanding of the principles underlying CfE and encourage teachers both to engage with the ideas and see the opportunities for curricular reform.

The summary report produced by Priestley and Minty into the implementation of CfE in Highland region came to the following conclusions:

First, CfE has much to commend it, although its implementation has been far from smooth. There remains a risk that eventual implementation in many schools will not represent the sorts of transformational change envisaged by the architects of the new curriculum. Second, implementation is dependent upon the active engagement of professional and committed teachers. Our research has convinced us that Scotland has a highly professional and motivated teaching workforce; however, such engagement has been rendered difficult for many by a lack of clarity and coherence in the documents that have guided implementation, and the lack of systematic processes for closing the implementation gap between policy and practice (Priestley & Minty, 2012: p. 9).

Predictably, some of the press reports sensationalised the findings: e.g. the headline in the Scotsman (April 11) was 'Curriculum for Excellence; failure at the heart of the school system'. Selective reporting and misrepresentation are common hazards that researchers face. It was perhaps this that provoked an ill-judged response from government. Instead of acknowledging that the research contained some positive findings (e.g. that more than half of the survey respondents reported that their school had made good progress in implementing CfE) and that a mixed picture was only to be expected at this stage of

implementation, the government reaction was to try to present the study as out-of-date and unrepresentative of the country as a whole. An official spokeswoman was quoted as saying: 'This research is based on information collected in the previous school year in a single council area and great strides have been made since then to ensure effective implementation and build the confidence of teachers' (ibid.). The statement was inaccurate on two counts. The data were collected during 2011-12, which at the time of the comment was the current, not the previous, school year. Secondly, while it was true that the report related to only one local authority, evidence from other research and from an EIS survey was finding similar results elsewhere: a more recent EIS survey has confirmed teacher concerns about schools' readiness to meet the demands of CfE (available at [www.eis.org.uk](http://www.eis.org.uk))

Perhaps the hope was that by attempting to dismiss the research, the government's 'feel good' narrative would prevail and researchers would learn not to take on the big boys in Holyrood public relations. When Mark Priestley defended his position, at the same time distancing himself from the Scotsman headline, the result was that the story actually received much more coverage than the government would have liked. It is a regrettable fact that some officials consistently fail to learn the lesson that honest engagement with bad news as well as good is likely to be a better long-term strategy than concealment or misrepresentation. Following this episode, Priestley started a blog (<http://mrpriestley.wordpress.com>) in which he gave a measured account of the controversy the report had produced.

As in the McPherson episode, official reactions gradually changed from defensive paranoia to a willingness to engage with the researchers. Priestley and Minty were subsequently invited to give seminars at both Scottish Government and Education Scotland. Clearly there are some people at senior levels in the policy community who appreciate that it makes sense to listen to what good researchers have to say.

As a footnote to attempts to control the official narrative of CfE, let me mention an interesting feature of the approved discourse. I was asked by someone who is not Scottish about the origins of the word 'capacity' in Curriculum for Excellence. The four 'capacities' (successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors, responsible citizens) are central to the whole initiative and quickly became a sort of mantra repeated in staffrooms across Scotland. Where had the term 'capacity' come from? Why was it chosen in preference to other possible terms such as 'competence', a concept which enjoyed a certain vogue for a time? I did not know the answer but I undertook to try to find out. I e-mailed two members of the original review group which produced the first CfE report in 2004. One replied 'The group never decided this. The civil service did it afterwards. I have always hated it.' The other responded in a similar vein: 'To the best of my recollection, there was little discussion about the term "capacities"; indeed, I recall that the word "purposes" is what we discussed and we used the word "characteristics" to amplify each of the four. I remember, at the time, wondering why the drafters of the final report had used the term "capacities" and for quite some time afterwards, when talking about the report, I made it clear that I saw them as purposes. However, by that time the term capacities had been immortalised in posters on walls up and down the country. . .' For me, these comments reinforce the need to pay very close attention to the language of educational policy. There is considerable mileage in the application of techniques of discourse analysis to policy documents.

## **OPTIONS FOR RESEARCHERS**

It would be easy to characterise the examples I have given as indicating that the default position of government is always controlling and oppressive and that researchers are always in the role of victims. I think that is neither accurate nor particularly helpful. The record shows a much more variable and uneven pattern, with periods when relations were quite productive and other times when relations were on the chilly side. Often these variations depended on the particular personalities involved. And if sometimes researchers do feel a

bit victimised, there is an obligation on them to ask whether they might have contributed to that situation.

In the McPherson account that I referred to, he mentions that one reason for the hostility of some officials was a feeling that much educational research was trivial: it was often seen as narrow, small-scale, and not generalizable. Moreover, there was a perception that researchers were often inclined to prefer 'soft' qualitative methodologies over 'hard' quantitative approaches which might provide more robust findings. I suspect that is still part of the reason for the arms-length attitude of some within Scottish Government. I wonder too if a sense of disappointment with the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS), which ran from 2004 to 2009, is part of the explanation. AERS was designed to build research capacity across Scotland, led by a consortium of Strathclyde, Stirling and Edinburgh Universities. I should admit my own involvement with AERS since I was Head of Educational Studies at Strathclyde at the start of the project and one of the signatories to the successful bid document. There was, I think, an expectation on the part of government that the £2 million funding of AERS would lead to a situation where there would be less reliance on government funding in the future, as capacity was increased. The hope was that educational researchers within universities would be able to sustain their own future. Indeed in the Henry Hepburn article I referred to earlier, a government spokesman was quoted as saying that AERS was about 'creating a self-sustaining, vibrant infrastructure for educational research' (Hepburn, 2011: p. 14) that could continue after direct funding ended.

Now some good work certainly came out of AERS: it provided support for novice and developing researchers and there were a number of interesting publications produced by staff involved in one or more of the three networks (Learners, Learning and Teaching: School Management and Governance: Schools and Social Capital). However, the evaluation carried out by staff from Cardiff University was rather mixed in its conclusions (Scottish Government, 2007). I don't know if robust discussions took place between the leading figures in AERS and government officials about the quality of the research output: shortly after it started I moved to Aberdeen University, which was not a member of the consortium. Some Aberdeen staff took part in projects but their involvement was limited. My point is that in the absence of frank dialogue about the mutual perceptions and expectations of researchers and policy makers in relation to AERS, the scene would be set for a period of disengagement between the parties.

Revisiting old grievances is, however, not a particularly healthy or profitable activity and more energy should be devoted to making a case for important areas of research that need to be explored. Prime among these is a proper independent evaluation of Curriculum for Excellence. It is regrettable that Scottish Government has not commissioned such a study. It needs to be said loudly and clearly that an internal evaluation carried out by Education Scotland a few years down the line will simply not be acceptable. It will bring back memories of the bad old days when members of the inspectorate were allowed to evaluate policies which they had helped to develop and implement in the first place (Humes, 1986).

There are also arguments to be advanced about the importance of research fields which are either under-developed or non-existent. Let me mention three. Leaving aside teacher education, there is comparatively little research on further and higher education in Scotland. Where it does occur, it tends to take place outside Schools and Faculties of Education. For example, in August 2012 there was an interesting conference at St Andrews University on the history of higher education, and there is an ongoing project at Glasgow Caledonian University on the impact of mass higher education on the culture and governance of universities: neither St Andrews nor Glasgow Caledonian has a School of Education. Current arguments about the relative funding allocations for further and higher education, as well as about the mergers taking place within the further education sector, present worthwhile opportunities for research into post-school education.

My second example is one that I have raised in a number of other contexts - the need for a Scottish Centre for the Study of the Economics of Education, similar to the one at the London School of Economics (with links to the London Institute of Education). The constituency of people in Scotland who really understand the economics of education is

disappointingly small. Decisions about the allocation of funds will become more and more critical as the effects of budget cutbacks really begin to bite. Can the Scottish position on student fees be sustained beyond the next election? Is there a case for devoting more resources to the early years in the hope that there will be less need for remedial intervention further up the school? Should community learning and development cease to be treated as a Cinderella service compared to other sectors? If so, where would additional funds come from? Not all policy decisions should be decided on the basis of a crude investment/return model, but we need more researchers who understand the field of economics, if only to ensure that policy decisions can be subject to intelligent interrogation. It is hoped that the contribution of David Bell, a Professor of Economics, to the fourth edition of *Scottish Education* will encourage education professionals to undertake work in this field (Bell 2013).

My third example is well outside my own comfort zone but it seems to me to be potentially very important. I am referring to the daily advances in the fields of genetics and neuroscience, whose potential implications for our understanding of human learning and development are immense. In 2005 there was a review of Neuroscience and Education carried out by John Hall at SCRE (Hall, 2005). I would be interested to know if there has been any follow-up to that. Similarly, how many educationists are up to speed with the significance for education of research findings coming from genetics? Developing these links effectively would require interdisciplinary work involving education specialists and scientific experts. The creation in 2011 of the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Young Academy of Scotland, which brings together some of the most talented academics and professionals and encourages them to pursue inter-disciplinary enquiries, provides a possible forum for such ventures (see Humes, 2013).

I mention these areas partly to suggest that there is limited mileage in simply bemoaning the fact that government attitudes to educational research are less positive than we might wish. Even if that is so, it is still important to look to the future, identify where there are gaps, and make the case for developing new areas.

It is also important to think about the interface between government politics, professional politics and personal values. There are constraints, at present powerful constraints, coming from government, both in terms of funding and in terms of the kinds of topics that are considered worth researching. There are also pressures deriving from within the academic community - to secure grants, to publish in refereed journals, to produce enough high-quality output to ensure entry in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014, which will assess research quality across the UK and determine future funding allocations. For many researchers, finding a way through these pressures is not easy, particularly if they have ethical concerns about what is expected of them – deriving, for example, from the kind of research they are encouraged to undertake or the feeling that truth is being compromised in the reporting of findings.

In making these points, I am very conscious that the approach I adopted in the course of my own career is much harder to maintain nowadays. I was always resistant to being drawn into what I saw as the rather cosy and collusive world of the Scottish educational policy community: I wanted to retain a degree of detachment and independence. Consequently, most of my research was unfunded, a situation that would now have career penalties for a young researcher. On the plus side, my approach gave me the freedom to investigate those topics that I considered important and to publish what I wanted. The political and professional context has changed since then and it would be wrong of me to suggest to the current generation of young researchers that they should follow my example. What I would say, however, is that there is a need for both what I call 'insider' and 'outsider' approaches to the investigation of educational topics. There are certain things that only insiders can get to know through being on official committees and working parties, and having easy access to key players in government and public sector organisations. But, equally, there are certain things that only outsiders, with their more detached perspective, can see because they have not been socialised into a particular, 'approved' way of regarding the processes of policy making. Deciding where they want to be on the insider/outsider spectrum is, I think, one of the hardest tasks now facing young researchers.

It's not just individuals who face hard choices. Organisations also have to decide how to position themselves. Some have more freedom to do so than others. As noted earlier Education Scotland's research agenda will have to be aligned to government priorities. The newly independent General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) has perhaps a little more scope to be innovative, and it will be interesting to see what this might mean for research. It published a strategy document in August 2012 stating that its research programme should have three main purposes:

- To encourage engagement with, and participation in, research by Scottish teachers;
- To develop the Council's evidence base to underpin policy development;
- To produce evidence that will enhance the Council's ability to influence the development of policy and practice in Scottish education (GTCS, 2012, p. 1).

The document went on to summarise the research activities of GTCS, including the teacher researcher programme (which aims to encourage classroom practitioners to carry out small-scale action research projects), in-house research (designed to inform the core work of the council) and commissioned research (drawing on the expertise of academics to investigate topics of relevance to Council policies and priorities). There was an emphasis on 'positive working relationships' and 'strong and growing partnership' with both higher education institutions and Scottish Government. Notwithstanding its new independent status, GTCS is likely to continue to steer a careful political course, avoiding going against the grain of official policy in any overt way.

SERA, as the representative body of educational researchers in universities, will want to defend academic freedom but will also be conscious of the need to reflect a varied constituency of interests, ranging from established academics to early-career lecturers, researchers on short-term contracts and doctoral students. Most of the Schools of Education in universities have been going through a period of contraction or reconfiguration so their capacity for mounting a strategic response is limited, and is not made easier by the possibility that the REF results may encourage competition rather than cooperation. There is no easy answer to these dilemmas. What I would say, however - and this is the note on which I wish to end - is that there will be no prizes for timidity in whatever lies ahead. Researchers need to continue to ask hard questions, not only of government but also of themselves: that includes an honest appraisal of the value of their own research. Where they are confident of the quality of the work they are undertaking, they need to be prepared to defend it, as the examples of McPherson and Priestley show. They also need to make the case within their own institutions for the importance of educational studies as a discipline. Passive compliance in the face of corporate decisions to scale down commitment to the discipline will merely lead to further marginalisation. A combination of political astuteness and intellectual courage offers the best hope of a healthier future for educational research in Scotland.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to Craig Munro, Strategic Director for Strategy, Performance and Corporate Resources at Education Scotland for information he provided about ES's plans to develop its policy on research (given at an informal meeting in Stirling on February 5, 2013).

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