

OCCASIONAL PAPER

Approaches to research priorities for policy: A comparative study

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THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT

 NCVER



Australian Government
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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or the Scottish Government.

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About the research



Approaches to research priorities for policy: A comparative study

Diana Wilkinson, Chief Social Researcher, The Scottish Government

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is managing a consultation process to consider education and training research priorities for 2010 and beyond. To begin deliberations a forum of invited stakeholders was convened in October 2009.

Diana Wilkinson, Chief Social Researcher with the Scottish Government, was invited by NCVER to kick off the process by discussing the nexus between research and policy.

Key messages

- ❖ Australia, by comparison with Scotland, lacks an overarching skills and lifelong learning policy, under which the national research priorities could be framed. On the other hand, while the Scottish and United Kingdom governments invest a considerable amount of funding in educational research, there are no 'national research priorities' to shape that investment.
- ❖ The cross-cutting nature of VET research, the complex problems it seeks to address and its relevance to wider policy contexts demand multi-disciplinary approaches to the research.
- ❖ To encourage research that is more forward looking, the national priorities should focus on the strategic gaps in the evidence base rather than on shorter-term issues.

Following the consultations, the NCVER Board, in mid-2010, will provide advice to the education and training ministers on the national priorities.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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Introduction

The arguments for strategic investment in research and development as a foundation for national prosperity are uncontested. ‘The nations that can thrive in a highly competitive global economy will be those that can compete on high technology and intellectual strength’.¹ Particular emphasis is placed on science and innovation and its commercialisation. Far less attention has been paid to the role and value of social science, arts and humanities research in contributing to a nation’s ‘health’ and prosperity.

Social science plays a key role in informing, developing and implementing social policies which complement and support economic development.² There is growing interest in the ‘return on investment’ in social science research, exemplified by the focus of the United Kingdom’s Research Councils on ‘impact’³ and, while there is an emergent academic field on the use of research in policy,⁴ less attention has been paid to the processes of research planning and prioritisation. If the use and impact of research in policy is to be maximised, there is a strong argument for (at least) some investment to align with national policy priorities.

This paper takes an example of the strongly applied research field of vocational education and training (VET) and uses two contrasting case studies of research planning in Scotland and Australia to consider the extent to which it is feasible—or desirable—to align academic research investment with short, medium- and long-term policy priorities.

¹ HM Treasury, ‘Science & Innovation Investment Framework 2004–2014’, HMSO, London, 2004.

² See, for example, Scotland’s National Performance Framework (Scottish Budget Spending Review 2007), <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/11/13092240/9>>.

³ Economic and Social Research Council Strategic Plan 2009–2014, <<http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/strategicplan>>.

⁴ For example, S Nutley, I Walter & H Davies, *Using evidence: How research can inform public services*, Policy Press, London, 2007.

Australia

In 2007 the ministers responsible for training in Australia signed off a number of national research priorities, which have since shaped much of the research on vocational education and training (VET) in that country. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research⁵ (NCVER) is currently coordinating a program of consultation on new priorities to reflect the changing training policy and practice landscape and new long-term challenges for the sector. As the first stage of the exercise a forum was held in Sydney in October 2009; there will be a further public consultation event in February 2010 and there is an ongoing opportunity for interested parties to comment online.

The Sydney forum comprised a structured event attended by a wide range of vocational education and training stakeholders from both the supply and demand side—research providers, funders and users. In advance of the event a short discussion paper prepared by NCVER was circulated, exploring potential drivers of change for the sector; factors likely to influence Australia's future skills development—economic, demographic, social, technology, and sustainability were expanded into ten 'themes'. After an introductory session, facilitated group discussions were conducted; these explored research needs around the published themes and then moved towards prioritising these.

To an observer, the particular strengths of the forum—in terms of process—included careful planning, with clear advance briefing in the form of the discussion paper setting out suggested themes accompanied by background material on current activity. The presence of a wide range of stakeholders generated a sense of inclusiveness in informing development of the priorities. The 50 or so attendees were drawn from a range of academic disciplines and centres—from both federal and state governments, training and industry organisations, skills councils, unions and employer- and employee-based associations, VET practitioners and providers, businesses and enterprises and community organisations. There was a high level of debate in the sessions, informed by multiple perspectives, with a clear sense of purpose engendered by expert facilitation.

Time constraints meant that relatively few topics (listed in the discussion paper <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2195.html>>) were covered in depth by the groups at the forum. However, a number of important strategic issues and influences on future research priorities were identified, including:

- ✧ the current policy context—particularly the role of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development
- ✧ 'system design'—the overall design of the sector, its effectiveness and responsiveness to economic cycles
- ✧ the impact of contextual/system changes, for example, in boundaries (and rivalry?) between universities and colleges
- ✧ the need for culture change to break down barriers between the different sectors and adopt a more holistic approach
- ✧ relative neglect of the 'demand' side—or market for—VET

⁵ NCVER is a not-for-profit company owned by the Australian Commonwealth and state and territory ministers with responsibility for education and training <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/index.html>>.

- ✧ VET's wider role in cross-cutting policy agendas, for example, relationships with mental health, crime, communities, social capital and a recognition that VET research should be in the vanguard, for example, in relation to social exclusion
- ✧ the need to focus on outcomes (individual, national) as much as inputs and outputs.

NCVER's summary of the outcomes from the forum can be found on the blog:
<<http://futuresresearch.pbworks.com./Summary-of-consultation-held-in-Sydney%2C-13-October-2009>>.

The intention is that the outcome of the forum will provide one of the building blocks for the new national research priorities to be announced by the ministers for education and training in 2010. As with the earlier 2007–10 priorities, these will provide a framework on which NCVER commissions research under the National VET Research and Evaluation Program, while also providing broad direction for NCVER's own program of research. Other agencies and organisations may also elect to frame their research activities within the national priorities.

Scotland (and the United Kingdom)

Although the focus of this comparative case study is policy in Scotland, where education and training is a largely devolved function, it is not possible to separate Scotland out from the wider United Kingdom research governance and infrastructure. Therefore contextual material relating to the UK is also included.

In the UK in the period 2001–07, £316 million was directly invested in education—including vocational—research in universities.⁶ Government, including government agencies, was the largest funder of educational research (£182m) with Research Councils (£55m) and UK-based charities (£37m) the other significant funders.⁷

However in Scotland and the UK there are no ‘National Research Priorities’ to shape this investment. Different funders have different, although sometimes, overlapping agendas. *Central Government Departments* commission applied research to inform policy. While some departments do publish their own thematic priorities; for example, The English Department for Children, Schools and Families’ analysis and evidence strategy linked to their policy objectives⁸, the short-term and reactive nature of government research needs tends to inhibit longer-term research planning. In practice much government research is advertised on a project-by-project, ad hoc basis.

Of the other major research funders, *charities* set their own research priorities in accordance with their distinct philosophies and/or constitutions. For example, among those involved in education research in the United Kingdom, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation issues calls for proposals within narrowly defined programs; the Nuffield Foundation identifies priority topics; and Esmée Fairbairn, while less specific in subject, prioritises filling gaps, improving practice and monitoring impact.

The *United Kingdom research councils* do have strategic, that is, national priorities, although these tend to be broadly focused rather than discipline- or subject-specific. For example, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which spent around £118 million in 2008–09 (of which a small proportion went on education research), recently published its strategic plan⁹ identifying seven key ‘challenges’ for research, which they will use in prioritising future investment: succeeding in the global economy; global poverty; population change and migration; energy and the environment; global security; public health; and individual behaviour. These priorities, which will be used in shaping and directing academic research investment over the next five years, emerged from a period of consultation with stakeholders, including central government.

Within the Scottish Government a stocktake of evidence needs for skills and lifelong learning policy is currently underway and is being conducted by in-house researchers and analysts. This is focusing on how research and evidence can best support the achievement of the broad outcomes contained in Scotland’s National Performance Framework¹⁰ either directly, for example, on better employment opportunities, cross-cutting, for example, on the contribution of skills and training to

⁶ RAE2008 Sub-Panel 45 Education, Subject overview report. The period covered is six-and-a-half years.

⁷ Other education research conducted outwith the university sector is unquantified.

⁸ <<http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/AES-2009S.pdf>>.

⁹ <<http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/strategicplan>>.

¹⁰ See note 2.

longer, healthier lives. Linked to this is ongoing longer-term planning and investment in data sources/infrastructure to support research (often in collaboration with the UK Research Councils).

However, the policy and practice landscape in vocational education, skills and training extends way beyond the Scottish Government. A wide range of stakeholders with distinct research needs exists, as the following table demonstrates.

Table 1 Scotland—stakeholders in skills and training

Organisation and role	Research focus
Scottish Government – Lifelong Learning Directorate and others: policy formulation, resource prioritisation	Outcomes focused, what works; cross-cutting
Local Government and Community Planning Partnerships: policy and service delivery	Delivery – what works; good practice
Skills Development Scotland: support for skills development information, advice and guidance for careers	Customer insight; program evaluation
Scotland’s 43 colleges: delivery of training	Efficiency and effectiveness – accountability
Scottish Funding Council: distributing funding to higher education and further education	Economic growth
Scottish Qualifications Authority	Scottish Qualifications Authority systems and processes
Employers	Skills, workforce
Trade unions	Employees working conditions, pay etc.
UK interests, for example, UK Sector Skills Councils and UK Commission for Employment Skills	Skill, workforce
Universities* and UK Research Councils	Academic excellence

Note: *Academic centres of expertise in this field are located across the UK, including at the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning at Stirling and Glasgow Caledonian, but more dominantly in the south of England, for example, the Centre for Learning and Life Chances (LLAKES) at the Institute of Education in London, the Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) in Oxford and the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics.

At present there is no coordinated research infrastructure which links these different interests though there may be some bilateral activity, for example, between the Scottish Government and the Research Councils, between the Scottish Funding Council and the colleges.

Discussion

The wide range of research priorities identified at the forum clearly demonstrates that VET research and its uses are diverse, ranging from problem-solving for practitioners—‘what works?’—to understanding the operation and dynamics of service contexts, to informing policy choices and resource allocation. The cross-cutting nature of VET research, the complex problems it seeks to address, and its relevance in the wider policy contexts of social exclusion, health, communities and justice present particular challenges for collaborative planning and prioritisation.

Different stakeholders clearly have different needs, in terms of type of research and time frames. While the NCVER forum showed that it is possible to achieve consensus around broad themes, the next stage of translating these into research activity to be delivered through a ‘national’ program presents risks of mismatch with original intentions and imbalance in coverage. Should a key role for collaborative planning therefore be to identify and focus on those *strategic gaps* in the evidence base that require shared investment over longer periods of time, for example, large household surveys, longitudinal research, or systematic reviews of policy and program evaluations? As an example, longitudinal research plays a key role in understanding the causes and drivers of deep-rooted policy challenges around poverty, inequality, economic inactivity, poor health. Many of these challenges are long-running, entrenched and complex and have failed to respond to sectoral policies of the past. Longitudinal research will also contribute to evaluating and measuring the long-term impacts of policies on individuals and households over time and can be used for ‘spend to save’ arguments (for example, spend on vocational training now, save on unemployment benefits later). This approach of focusing national priorities and research investment on strategic gaps and leaving shorter-term, reactive research needs to be met by individual sponsors would therefore side-step the problem of misalignment between research and policy and practice as a medium-term program evolves.

The collaborative approach to national research planning adopted in the Australian model also mirrors changing approaches to policy-making in many Western countries, driven by the need to respond to growing social and economic complexity. Increasingly, the role of central government is articulated as setting outcomes and direction and creating the conditions for local actors—a diverse range of organisations involved in public policy delivery—to maximise the use of resources.¹¹

In this context the Australian ‘model’ is highly relevant to the current direction of policy and practice in Scotland. The minority Scottish Government with a limited legislative program is explicitly reliant on partnerships with local government, agencies and the third (voluntary) sector to co-produce policy to deliver an agreed set of national outcomes¹² within a National Performance Framework. Several of these 15 national outcomes are dependent on successful vocational education and skills policies, for example:

- ✧ We realise our full economic potential with more and better employment opportunities for our people.
- ✧ We are better educated, more skilled and more successful, renowned for our research and innovation.

¹¹ See, for example, J Chapman, *System failure: Why governments must learn to think differently*, Demos, London, 2004 and IPPR, *Innovations in government: International perspectives on civil service reform*, 2007.

¹² <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/11/13092240/9>>.

- ✧ Our young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

But equally important, research on vocational education and skills will contribute to a number of other outcomes in the domains of health, equalities, communities, and public services:

- ✧ We live longer, healthier lives.
- ✧ We have tackled the significant inequalities in Scottish society.
- ✧ We have strong, resilient and supportive communities where people take responsibility for their own actions and how they affect others.
- ✧ Our public services are high-quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local people's needs.

There has never been a better time therefore for the multiplicity of stakeholders in vocational education, skills and training to work together in identifying research needs and priorities to address these shared challenges. Research agendas need to not only to be multi-agency but consciously cross-disciplinary. As an illustration, the current priorities in Scotland range from developing a measurement framework for skills utilisation; considering the impact of good leadership and management on healthy working lives; gaining a better understanding of the complex interactions of the factors that contribute to the not in employment, education or training (NEET) group; and work on neuroscience and learning across the lifespan.

While the rationale for joint planning is clear and shared by both countries, transferability of the Australian model may be tempered by practical and cultural issues. An earlier attempt at collaborative research planning involving policy stakeholders and academics—the Evidence in Lifelong Learning Network (ELLNet)¹³—eventually failed due to perceptions of lack of relevance to the immediate policy research agenda and the absence of levers to secure collaborative funding. The existence of a 'neutral' but expert facilitating organisation like NCVER with its multiple sponsors and stakeholders and wide remit appears critical to progressing collaborative research planning; no such organisation exists in Scotland. One of the barriers is clearly the sectoral nature of individual organisations' research agendas in Scotland and at present there is no formal mechanism for these organisations to plan together, although an informal group of research managers is being established.

¹³ 'ELLNet using evidence in the policy cycle: Report on the work of the Social Research Leadership Group Knowledge Transfer Working Group', Scottish Government 2006, <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/09/07140049/0>>.

Conclusions

The Scottish Government has a tradition of evidence-based policy that relies on support from cadres of in-house researchers and analysts, on filling research gaps by commissioning short-term projects or programs of work and, more recently, on knowledge transfer and exchange activity to capitalise on local academic expertise. However, new paradigms of policy-making, with a shift to co-production with 'external' stakeholders require a fresh look at evidence and how it feeds into the system. Much attention is currently being paid to research impact, but with the shrinking public sector financial resources accompanying the economic downturn, there are powerful arguments for also attending to efficient research planning and to sharing resources.

The Australian model therefore looks attractive, but the main inhibitors are the absence of a culture of national research planning in Scotland and an infrastructure to deliver it. Initial steps could be taken in Scotland however to create a planning network, perhaps facilitated by central government researchers, with high-level buy-in and some resource allocation, to provide a platform for future development. Given tightening resources and the complex problems facing society, it is essential that reliable and relevant social science evidence is available on which to base decisions and that good social science is used to demonstrate value for money.

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