

Book Review: The Impact of Research in Education: An International Perspective

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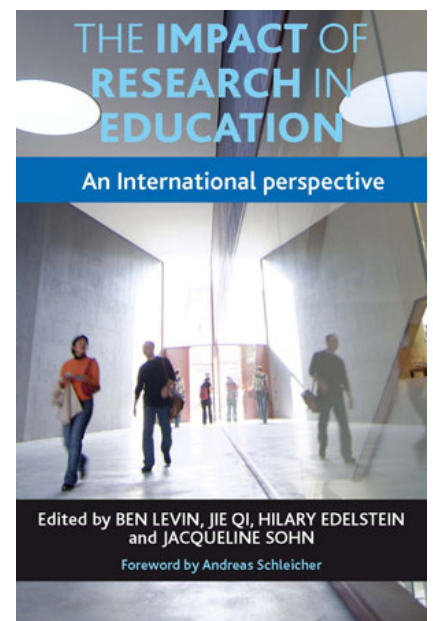
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*Research by universities plays an increasingly important role in shaping education policy around the world, yet there is much dissatisfaction with the ways that they share that work. This book analyses efforts and systems in nine countries to mobilize research knowledge, describing the various factors that support or inhibit that work. **Cole Armstrong** finds that this is a well-written and considered description of an important topic.*

The Impact of Research in Education: An International Perspective. Ben Levin, Jie Qi, Hilary Edelstein, and Jacqueline Sohn (eds.). Policy Press. July 2013.



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In *The Impact of Research in Education: An International Perspective*, contributors address an interesting and important issue: specifically, “how do universities around the world [mobilise] research knowledge in education”? Editors Ben Levin, Jie Qi, Hilary Edelstein, and Jacqueline Sohn pull together stories from a number of diverse countries, ranging from the UK to South Africa, China to the USA, and smaller states such as Singapore and Denmark, to explore how higher education institutions are attempting to mobilise the education research they conduct for greater impact on policy and practice. The authors place these attempts at knowledge mobilisation within the political, operational, and funding contexts that exist in each country, making this a useful and thought provoking read for academics around the world.

The book begins by providing a well-reasoned account for why knowledge mobilisation matters in the field of education, with the OECD’s Andreas Schneider explaining in the foreword that “the promise of evidence-informed policy and practice is often not matched by the reality”. In this section he contrasts the differences in research spending in industrialised countries allocated to educational research with health research, as well as the more limited impact that educational research has on professional practise (for another look at differences in how research has impacted practise in education and health read Atul Gawande’s *Better: A Surgeon’s Notes on Performance*). This book fills a gap in exploring how different educational jurisdictions and higher education institutions have tried to improve the use of research on educational practise, and the differences in contexts that these institutions operate in.

For example Johan Muller and Ursula Hoadley, in their chapter on knowledge mobilisation in South Africa, discuss how political events have influenced both the supply and demand of education research, and how it is used to inform policy. They describe the difficulties of the post-apartheid government to integrate a disparate and

segregated education system, and the difficulties that universities had in moving from a political activist role to a policy informing role. For example, it was found that “universities had turned out activists skilled in critique, but not in advanced statistics or economics of education”. In the post-apartheid era, while there was a demand from government to utilise educational research, the ability for the education sector to provide such knowledge was limited. In this knowledge vacuum, imported ideas of knowledge mobilisation and community engagement were promoted by US foundations (e.g. the Ford Foundation), although with little beneficial impact on communities.

In his chapter explaining the knowledge mobilisation of educational research in England, David Gough describes the changes that have been made in utilising educational research since the election of the Labour government in 1997 and by subsequent governments. It provides an interesting description of an educational system that in several ways is relatively developed in its thinking about how to utilise education research to direct policy and practice, and the barriers to achieving greater impact. White papers such as the *Modernising Government* report in 1999 which “emphasised the importance of evidence in developing public services”, the establishment of organisations such as the National Education Research Forum (NERF), and the funding of the Evidence for Policy Practise Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) at the Institute of Education, University of London, have all influenced the mobilisation of education research in this country.

In



Students walking on the plaza in front of Jameson Hall and the Jameson Steps at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Credit: [Ian Barbour](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

the concluding chapter, Sarah Nutley reflects on what can be learnt from the differing practices identified in the countries studied. This is a particularly important chapter, as it is the common themes that have emerged across the different countries covered in this book as well as their respective differences, which make this topic such a hot issue. For example, the author lists three ideas that are worth further consideration in the future: the promotion of multiple routes for knowledge transfer; providing greater incentives to higher education staff for engagement activities; and further use of ICT strategies. Such ideas are already being utilised within institutions, for example the knowledge exchange grants provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK to support knowledge sharing, or at the University of Melbourne where knowledge mobilisation and impact are included as a key indicator in both staff development and promotion decisions.

Of interest is the difference in approaches taken by countries in promoting knowledge mobilisation, reflecting

differences in the structure of their higher education system, the focus of research funding, and other factors. For example, the more directed and top-down approach of knowledge mobilisation in the USA can be contrasted with more bottom-up and local implementation of knowledge in Singapore. This results in differing challenges, where in the USA the difficulty is ensuring that research findings are communicated from a more centralised information core, while in Singapore greater difficulty is encountered in ensuring that knowledge is exchanged amongst schools and districts. Such comparisons are likely to be of interest to many readers, in helping identify the importance of context in attempts to increase the impact of education research.

However, one aspect that may disappoint, and perhaps is outside of the scope of this book, is concrete examples of effective knowledge mobilisation in the education sector, or areas upon which higher education institutions could effectively direct their attention. While this might have been welcome, particularly for readers wishing to identify next steps in knowledge mobilisation, in Nutley's concluding chapter a number of factors that might limit the transferability of knowledge management practices from one jurisdiction to another are listed including differences in governance structures and cultural values. As such, the interested reader might be better directed to refer to some of the successful strategies referred to within the country chapters, while being mindful of the context in which their institution operates.

While some chapters are clearer and more engaging than others, *The Impact of Research in Education: An International Perspective* is a well-written and considered description of an important topic. Given its importance, and the fact that "many governments are increasingly interested in the role that research evidence can play in making their education systems more efficient and effective", it is a worthy book that demonstrates the shortcomings in knowledge mobilisation found in many higher education institutions. Hopefully a second volume in forthcoming years will be able to describe much improvement as a result of the issues that have been identified.

Cole Armstrong recently completed an MSc in Social Research Methods at the [Department of Methodology](#) at LSE, with a dissertation that looked at ethnic segregation in New Zealand schools. Cole is currently a Research Manager at an international NGO that utilises the mass media for development purposes. His research interests focus around evaluation methodologies and the use of communication techniques for development aims. [Read more reviews by Cole.](#)