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Jan Wright
University of Wollongong, jwright@uow.edu.au

Trevor Gale
Monash University

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Utility as a first principle for education research: Reworking autonomy in Australian higher education

Trevor Gale and Jan Wright
Monash University and the University of Wollongong

Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the community impact of education research, specifically as this is conceived within a changing context of research assessment in Australia, first mooted by the previous Federal Coalition (conservative) Government within a new Research Quality Framework (RQF), and now to be reworked by the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative by the incoming Federal Labor (progressive) Government. Convinced that a penchant for the utility of research will not go away, irrespective of the political orientations of government, our interest is in exploring: the assumption that research, particularly in areas such as education, should have an impact in the community (as this was first defined within the RQF); the difficulties much education research (despite its 'applied' characterisation) has in complying with this ideal; and what a community impact requirement means for the kinds of education research that will be privileged in the future. In particular, we are concerned about the potential narrowing of education research directed at/by community impact and what is lost in the process. One potential loss or weakening is in the positional autonomy of higher education to conduct independent education research.

Introduction

In its broadest sense, this paper addresses the question of autonomy in the field of higher education, from an Australian positioning. Our specific focus is on a growing expectation of education research utility and its potential for restructuring the field, challenging its already weakened relational autonomy and more recently its positional autonomy, which up until now has remained relatively strong. Our claims are framed by the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his appreciation for 'field' and the relative autonomy of fields from other fields and from economic and political fields in particular (e.g. see Bourdieu 1993). More specifically, we are enticed by Karl Maton's (2005) distinction between the relational and positional dimensions of autonomy (RA and PA respectively), as he theorises these in the context of higher education in England and particularly in relation to the influx of (different) students to university in the 1960s. As we elaborate, we see these dimensions as explanatory of recent moves to more closely monitor what academics do and how.

In our analysis, we are concerned with the heteronomous principles of research utility now challenging the autonomy of research in higher education institutions; in this case, education research conducted within Australian universities. This challenge has been brought to the fore most recently by the previous Australian government proposed assessment of the quality of research undertaken by Australian academics, known as the Research Quality Framework (RQF), with similarities to the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and, perhaps less so, with New Zealand's Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF). While the recent change in government in Australia has called the implementation of the RQF to a halt, to be replaced by Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), we argue that this does not necessarily signal an end to external claims on the value of (education) research.

We begin our account with an overview of the changed relations between government and higher education, which now emphasise a place for 'higher education as a policy lever for

achieving greater competitiveness within a globalizing context of "knowledge economies" and "information societies"' (Maton 2005: 695). In Maton's terms, the established legitimacy of (neoclassical) economic principles within higher education has weakened the latter's relational autonomy and opened the way for redirecting research in the interests of the market. In our view, the logical consequence is a move towards research utility. The second section of the paper takes up this theme by examining how Australia's RQF intended to measure the utility of (education) research or its 'community impact' as it was termed. While the new Australian Federal Labor Government has announced that its replacement will not include measures of the impact of research outside the academy, internationally the RQF remains the research assessment exercise that most explicitly and specifically attempted to measure such matters. Given the institution of heteronomous economic principles within higher education, and the absence of other examples, we think such analysis could prove instructive.

The paper concludes with a consideration of the consequences of foregrounding the utility of education research in higher education. One way in which to understand these matters is in terms of Ball's (1994) distinction between first order and second order policy effects: 'First order effects are changes in practice or structure (which are evident in particular sites and across the system as a whole) and second order effects are the impact of these changes on patterns of social access, opportunity and social justice' (Ball 1994: 25-26). Maton (2005) argues, and we agree, that up until now neoliberalism's influence in higher education has been largely restricted to the field's relational autonomy: first order effects. However, the valorization of research utility within higher education has the potential to introduce research 'end users' into legitimate positions within higher education, realising second order effects.

From quantity to quality in assessing research performance

In May 2004, the then Australian Prime Minister (John Howard) announced the Australian federal government's intention to develop 'Quality and Accessibility Frameworks' for publicly funded research; in the first instance, focused on research conducted within the nation's universities. In December of the same year, the Government announced the appointment of a 13 member Expert Advisory Group (EAG), including its chair (Sir Gareth Roberts) who had recently completed a review of the United Kingdom's (UK's) Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Then on 29 March 2005, the Australian Minister for Education, Science and Training (Brendan Nelson, now leader of the Federal Opposition) confirmed the introduction of a new method for determining the basis for allocating government funds to universities to support their research activities, replacing the existing Research Quantum.[1] In brief, the move represented a shift from quantitative to qualitative measures of research performance, as well as an expansion to include a measure of the impact of this research on the Australian community.

Below is an extract from the media release issued at the time. It is included here because it exemplifies not only the thinking of Australian governments, then and now, but also the neoliberal themes that have characterised an increasing political intervention into the work of universities by governments of western nations more generally. In particular, it illustrates increased expectations by governments for publicly funded research to demonstrate its national benefit and for researchers and universities to be held similarly accountable. In Minister Nelson's words:

[1] The Research Quantum is a relatively small portion of the Operating Grant distributed to universities by the Australian Government, according to a formulae based on certain research performance indicators: research grant income, research student completions and research publications.

> The Research Quality Framework: Assessing the quality and impact of research in Australia issues paper will provide a detailed examination of research excellence and the impact of research, *including its broader implications for society* through economic, environmental and social benefits.
>
> Research is a key element of an innovative and economically prosperous nation and should be conducted in a sustained culture of excellence. High quality research will strengthen Australia's innovation base and ensure we remain competitive in the global environment.
>
> The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that resources provided to carry out research are directed to areas of research excellence and public benefit.
>
> This paper will provide the basis for developing a Research Quality Framework to measure both research excellence and research impact. The framework will provide a more consistent and comprehensive approach to assessing publicly funded research and will provide a sound foundation for future research resource allocation. (Nelson, 2005, emphasis added)

Given the experiences of the UK, New Zealand and other countries that have adopted similar research assessments, there was an expectation within the field that the impact of the RQF on Australian universities and academics would be considerable, including: a less forgiving environment for academics if they are not perceived as performing at a level set by their institution; imbalances between teaching, research and service; increased restructuring; increased levels of scrutiny and accountability at departmental, faculty and institutional levels; and so on.

What is particularly interesting in the Australian case is that unlike other national quality assessment exercises, the RQF made overt the expectation of demonstrable benefit from 'publicly funded' research. The early message was clear, taxpayers are paying for research and research should therefore be accountable to those taxpayers; they should be able to see value for money. As Brendan Nelson emphasised in his opening address to the National Stakeholders Forum (2 June 2005) during the development of the RQF:

> … every single dollar, every single dollar that we invest, whether in schools or universities, or research, or training, every dollar is a dollar that some Australian worked damned hard for, and we've got to make darn sure that every dollar that we invest delivers the very best outcomes for all Australians, and particularly the next generation. And, at the moment, as Australia's Minister for Science and Higher Education, if you like, I cannot, with any confidence, tell the average Australian that every dollar we invest in research funds and supports the highest quality research in all circumstances. (Nelson 2005)

By mid 2007, most universities were well on their way to preparing RQF portfolios; the final specification documents had been released and the chairs and panels appointed. While not uncontentious (e.g. see Lee 2007) the data collection for the quality component was relatively familiar, whereas the requirement to demonstrate 'impact' was less so. In the final RQF document:

> Impact refers to the extent to which research has led successfully to social, economic, environmental and/or cultural benefits to the wider community, or an element of the community.

In neoliberal terms, there is a clear imperative for governments to be able to justify to their publics their expenditure on research conducted by universities. Nelson's remarks to the sector (above), under the cover of fiscal responsibility to average Australians, articulate this ideology well. Included is a concern for economic and social accountability. However, accountability in Nelson's terms was intended to be more than just an interest in efficiency. By including in the research assessment exercise a focus on the impact of research in the community, the government raised expectations about the utility of research undertaken by universities, specifically for those outside the field. Moreover, the inclusion of research 'end-users' on panels to make judgments about this impact had the potential to differently position community end-users in these processes and hence challenge the positional autonomy of the higher education field; issues we return to in the conclusion.

At the 24 November 2007 national election, the Australian Labor Party convincingly defeated the incumbent Liberal/National Coalition Government. One month later (21 December 2007), Senator Kim Carr, the new Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research announced that the Australian Government would not be proceeding with implementation of the RQF in its initially conceived form. The reason given was that it was 'fundamentally flawed'. The media release at the time claimed that 'The RQF is poorly designed, administratively expensive and relies on an "impact" measure that is unverifiable and ill-defined'. It is important to note that the RQF was not abandoned because of its 'misguided' intentions (i.e. to measure the quality of research conducted by researchers in universities) but because of its 'flawed' methodology. In his press release, Senator Carr went on to say that 'the Australian Government is committed to a new streamlined, internationally-recognised, research quality assurance exercise using metrics or other agreed quality measures appropriate to each research discipline' (Carr, 2007).

To the relief of many academics, 'impact' was not a feature of this announcement. Nonetheless, accountability to taxpayers is still an important component of the rhetoric and metrics are still privileged in anticipating a process (the ERA) that will be streamlined and efficient. As Carr noted at the time: 'This approach will take advantage of the existing work that has been done on metrics development but also make sure that robust quality measures are developed for the humanities, creative arts, and the social sciences'. Announcement of this new approach – the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative – was made by Senator Carr in a media release on 26 February 2008. It reiterated many of the previous comments made by the outgoing government, including that the ERA 'will assess research quality using a combination of metrics and expert review by committees comprising experienced, internationally-recognised experts' and that 'The ERA model will provide hard evidence that taxpayers are getting the best bang for their buck in this critical area' (Carr, 2008).

Reflecting the Senator's December 2007 comments, notably absent from this new announcement was any indication of a community impact component in the ERA. However, we are still to be convinced that this is the end of the matter. In our view, the RQF merely made overt a much longer standing trend in expectations of research; a trend that was already producing models of demonstrable and measurable social, economic and environmental benefits (e.g. from National Health and Medical Research Council). While RQF 'impact'

expectations may have been shelved as an artefact of the previous Howard government, in the following sections we outline our belief that expectations around demonstrable utility will not go away and other means will emerge to 'steer' universities in directions desired by government.

Research utility: the logical extension of increasing neoliberal influence in higher education

The emphasis on impact in the Australian context is not a new or sudden shift in policy. Rather it is an overt manifestation of a number of major changes in higher education that have evolved in the second half of the twentieth century, produced by increasing political and economic pressures on and within the field of higher education and by changes in the relationship between universities and their social contexts (repositioning them as antithetical to ivory towers for the elite). These have included a major shift in the autonomy of universities. In the past, there was a 'belief that left to its own devices higher education will meet social and economic needs' (Maton 2005: 695). This is despite the fact that these needs were not at the forefront of university interest or activity. Indeed, 'institutions and disciplines were lauded for their distance from occupational relevance, practical application and instrumentalism and "institutional autonomy" and "academic freedom" were proclaimed necessary conditions for excellence' (Maton 2005: 691-692).

For the most part, faculties and schools of education in Australia do not have their origins in such autonomous environments. Up until the Dawkins amalgamations of Australian higher education institutions of the late 1980s / early 1990s, they were located in or constituted as 'lower status colleges … funded by local authorities [typically state governments] which exerted control over finance, buildings, staffing and course approval' (Maton 2005: 692). Indeed, for these colleges and their departments, becoming a university or part of a university required adopting the logic of the field, valorizing its autonomous markers including the value of knowledge for its own sake. This has often been a struggle, when these markers have conflicted with traditional teacher education privileging of experience in the field of teaching and suspicion of research that is not demonstrably aligned to practice.

With the growth of a market economy, Marginson (1997, p. 151) argues that research, education and educational research became subordinated to national economic policy through the policy reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s:

> Everywhere, education was seen as crucial to economic competitiveness, mobilised for economic reconstruction, and embedded in micro-economic reform, corporatisation and marketisation. The formation of citizens in education was subordinated to its new economic mission…. this time the objective was not so much the broad development of the skills and talents of the nation, as in the late Keynesian period, but the development of those specific aspects of education and research that assisted national economic competitiveness.

This has coincided with an increased expectation that universities should be accountable to the governments that fund them. Universities have increasingly been expected to contribute to the economic and social competitiveness of their home countries in the global marketplace, contending with 'knowledge economies' and 'information societies' (Maton 2005). To this end, governments have exercised 'tighter institutional control over policy decisions and introduced heteronomous ways of working, such as market mechanisms' (Maton 2005, p.

695). In relation to research, an area that has perhaps seemed more autonomous in its pursuit of knowledge, Donovan (2005a) argues that prior to research quality assessment exercises (such as the RAE, PBRF, RQF and a new ERA in Australia), governments exerted their influence indirectly through 'steering' mechanisms (incentives, funding priorities, employment policies) that guided researchers towards planned policy objectives. More recent research assessment exercises have sought to extend this influence, placing increasing pressure on the relational autonomy of the higher education field to ensure that its ways of working are more closely aligned to the desires of government, particularly its desires for the national economy.

Distrust of the field's authority to 'go it alone' is also gaining momentum in the community more broadly. Drawing on Muller (2000), Wheelehan (2008, p.146) argues that research is not only more accountable to government but the public reporting of research and 'the unanticipated ecological and social outcomes of scientifically based interventions in the world' have contributed to a growing expectation 'that science must be informed by, and accountable to, the needs of society'. This has been accompanied by an increased cynicism of 'science' and 'scientists' (terms often used as synonyms for 'research' and 'researchers', although see discussion below) as disagreements play out in the public domain. Again drawing on Muller (2000), Wheelehan (2008, p.146) argues that:

> the fact that scientists don't agree is not new, for they have never agreed. What is different is that the insulation between science and the public domain has been eroded. … The consequence was and is growing social complexity combined with a loss of public trust in knowledge producing institutions and in the capacity of knowledge to solve human problems (Singh, 2002: 575).

Even within the field there is competition among its sub-fields, which tends to be dominated by the 'natural sciences'. Donovan (2005a) argues that the social sciences (within which the disciplinary field of education is often subsumed) have always been regarded with suspicion (compared with the natural sciences) because they are perceived to 'lack the strict methodological rigour of the natural sciences'. Hence, social scientists have had to argue for their place in universities, often by conforming to a science model, because of a 'one-size fits all science and technology model' for research funding. In many ways this is felt even more acutely by education, given its historical positioning outside the field (see above).[2] We see this dominance of the science model in the insistence on metrics for assessing research quality, which do not always capture the quality of social science research. The 'distinctive features of social science are unaccounted for, undermining its potential "utility"' (Donovan 2005a, p. 603).

Citing the Heyworth report, which recommended the creation of the Social Science Research Council (1965), Donovan argues that social science is expected to conform to the natural scientific mould as 'a problem-solving activity that can "fix" things or offer permanent solutions' (2005a, p. 606), to convince government and community of its neutrality and objectivity. Indeed, this was a strategy employed by education researchers, particularly education psychologists (eg. Dewey), in their early attempts to achieve recognition for education as a discipline in its own right within higher education. More recently, in the 1993

[2] This is even the case for Faculties and Schools of Education that were established within Go8 universities at their inception rather than 'bolted on' at a later date. Monash University is a good example. In 2008 the University is celebrating its 50th anniversary. The book written to mark the event mentions the Faculty of Education in one line, even though it was one of the University's founding faculties.

White Paper, *Realising Our Potential*, all research councils were restructured into a 'policy network designed to produce a nationally coordinated science and technology research effort … steered towards the express utilitarian goal of national wealth creation' (p.607), which had the effect of subsuming social science within a science model. Donovan concludes that 'useful' social science is, in effect, 'positivist' social science, in contrast to 'the "fuzzy thinking" of interpretative or reflexive social science and social theory' (p.611).

Measures of community impact

In her review of quality and impact for the Council of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHASS), Donovan (2005b) begins the section on research impact by pointing to New Zealand (NZ), the Netherlands and the UK as having taken the lead (prior to the RQF) in developing measures of research impact. For example, NZ's PBRF asks for information on products and services developed for users and publications, presentations for users and on partnerships and linkages. Donovan writes that the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council 'is breaking promising new ground by developing "a radical new approach to impact assessment based on users of research knowledge rather than producers"' (p.23). She also reports that in the USA there is increasing interest in 'impact indicators … spurred particularly by the desire to evaluate the economic and social outcomes of research' (p.23).

Writing for her CHASS audience, Donovan (2005b) notes that while quality outputs are more susceptible to traditional quantitative measures, impact has the advantage of indicating 'the utilisation of knowledge beyond academia in the form of economic, policy, social, community, cultural and artistic benefits' and is more open to 'qualitative assessment incorporating user/beneficiary opinion' (p.24). She goes on to suggest that 'impact measures may hold the greatest potential for HASS streams to demonstrate their relevance and the benefits they bring to the richly varied aspects of the nation's life' (p.24). In this context, she encourages the Humanities and Social Sciences to develop new and innovative qualitative models of research impact.

However, Donovan's point here is not just a call to be innovative or strictly about ideology: that is, that HASS research should have an impact within the broader community, although this is perhaps implied to some degree. Rather, it is primarily about strategy: if HASS appropriate models of measuring research impact are not developed then existing potentially 'inappropriate' science models will be utilised instead. In particular, Donovan points out that Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) funded research organizations such as the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) and Australian Nuclear Science and Techmology Organisation (ANSTO) have for some time reported on measures of impact. While these organizations seem far removed from the research of HASS, SET practice has 'traditionally provided the template for national research policy' (Donovan, 2005b, p.7) As would be expected, research impact for these organizations is primarily about research commercialisaiton and technology transfer. However, CSIRO and AIMS also judge impact using 'customer satisfaction' measures (recognisable in end-user measures in the RQF).

In addition, CSIRO and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) have both developed indicators for the impact of research on people's lives that move beyond benefits to commerce and government. CSIRO's 'Outcome-Outputs framework' provides 'indicators for the economic, social and environmental benefits of CSIRO its research "arms" and for individuals' (CSIRO 2004, cited in Donovan, 2005b, p.9). Similarly, NHMRC's Performance

Management Framework now includes categories of impact including: 'Utilising knowledge' (indicated by measures of 'increased uptake of NHMRC health advice' such as non-academic citation rates, stakeholder awareness and satisfaction), 'Improved transfer of knowledge into health policy and practices' (indicated by NHMRC research rolled into other research, research leading to changes in policies and practices); and 'Strengthening communications and collaborations' (indicated by the level of external funding and the number of national and international collaborations and partnerships).

Clearly these indicators go beyond utility in economic or technological terms and offered great appeal to the EAG in constructing the RQF. Indeed, they demonstrate (from the point of view of government) the feasibility of measuring the social benefits and impact of research, beyond the science, engineering and technology sector. At the behest of government, what was new about the RQF was the hierarchical grading of community impacts (see table below) and the proposed (although always ambiguous) relationship between grades and funding.

[insert figure 1 here]

Fig 1: Rating Scale for Research Impact [RQF]

Rating	Description
A	Adoption of the research has produced an outstanding social, economic, environmental and/or cultural benefit for the wider community regionally within Australia, nationally or internationally.
B	Adoption of the research has produced a significant social, economic, environmental and/or cultural benefit for the wider community, regionally within Australia, nationally or internationally.
C	Research has been adopted to produce new policies, products, attitudes, behaviours and/or outlooks in the end user community.
D	Research has engaged with the end user community to address a social, economic, environmental and/or cultural issues regionally within Australia, nationally or internationally
E	Research has had limited or no identifiable social, economic, environmental and/or cultural outcome, regionally within Australia, nationally or internationally.

Source: DEST 2007, p.31

Impact as conceived in (relation to) the RQF

As argued above, while the RQF's moment may have passed, at least with respect to measuring the impact of research on the community, public and government expectations of the utility and accountability of research (including government funded educational research) have not and are not likely to go away. It is useful then to more closely examine the way 'impact' is conceived in to the context of the RQF, for what it says about how those (often positioned outside of the higher education field) conceive of what counts as impact (and the 'best' kind of impact) and what this means for educational researchers. More broadly, the expectation that researchers should be accountable for the value of their research outside universities and that this should be verifiable by indicators from outside the academy (including indicators valued by end-users), speaks to shifts in the autonomy of universities and particularly their relational autonomy.

In the RQF, the incentive for assessment of impact was explained in the following terms: 'for researchers to focus on the outcomes of their research insofar as these provide benefit to Australia's society, economy, environment and/or culture … [It is a] fundamental principle that the impact assessment model will apply equally across all research fields and disciplines' (DEST, 2006, p. 3). Moreover, 'A key principle is to direct RQF-related funding towards that research which generates impact' (DEST, 2006, p.3)

Research reported as having impact is contrasted with 'pure basic research'. That is, there was an expectation that research groups not able to claim impact would perform well in quality.

> Pure basic research will not be disadvantaged by the RQF, and neither shall this essential research be devalued. While Research Groupings focussed on pure basic research are unlikely to derive much benefit from the assessment of impact, they should be able to perform well in quality assessments. Conversely, Research Groupings that have an applied focus and may not achieve high ratings for quality, will have the opportunity to demonstrate their excellence though the impact assessment. (DEST, 2006, p.3)

'Impact' as defined in the RQF is clearly linked to what has already been described as the marketisation of research and the expectation that research should contribute to national economic competitiveness. At the same time, the consultative process generated pressures, particularly from the Go8 group of universities, for measures of 'impact' to recognise the work that (these) universities do. Although a concession was made that research groups doing basic research could apply for an exemption from the 'impact' component, in many universities, including some notable Go8 members, the expectation seems to have been that all groups should endeavour to demonstrate 'impact'. Certainly at both of the authors' universities, it seemed expected that educational research should be able to claim demonstrable impact. Some areas, such as creative arts, were quite welcoming of the chance to tell a 'story' of impact. But the practicalities of writing 'impact' statements were only beginning to be explored when the government changed hands.

As universities began to prepare their portfolios in 2007 the difficulties of demonstrating impact and particularly of demonstrating impact that would attract an A or B rating (see Figure 1 above) became more and more obvious. Impact would be judged on the basis of up to four case studies put forward by each Research Grouping (with a maximum of four pages allocated to each case study). Much of the concern around describing impact was the ambiguity of its categories and the ways these seemed to privilege certain types of impact; in particular, those that had a *demonstrable benefit* to the wider community. As Holbrook (2007) argues, most educational research would have difficulty demonstrating anything more than a C or D, despite Education being regarded by many as an applied field. Indeed, this proved to be something of a 'Catch 22' for Education. Could educational researchers also claim to be doing 'pure basic research'? Would research managers in universities accept claims to 'blue skies' research from education researchers? Was it feasible or strategic for Education Research Groups to claim an exemption from impact, particularly given that where the Panel determined this was not sustainable, a rating of E would be awarded?

In the final 'specifications' document there was more specific detail and examples were provided for each panel, under the headings 'Engagement', 'Uptake' and 'Benefit' (see below for how these were interpreted for Panel 11). However, what was not made explicit was how these 'levels' were differently valued in the hierarchical model of categorisation from A to D.

As Allyson Holbrook (2007) pointed out in her submission on 'Impact' following the release of the Panel specifications, 'active engagement' is the entry level (D), adoption (uptake) is necessary for C, while demonstrable significant or outstanding benefit is necessary for B or A.

The following is the explanations for each of these categories from the specifications on impact for Panel 11 (the Professional Studies panel of which Education was one of many groups including Law, Library Studies and Social Work):

> Demonstrated *engagement* with end-user, recognising the importance of research to address a defined social, economic, environmental and/or cultural issue.
>
> Examples:
>
> - involvement in community/end-user initiated projects and partnerships with the public sector, NGOs etc; receipt of funding
> - contribution to policy debate at international, national, state and local levels
> - participation in education programmes for relevant end-users
>
> Demonstrated *uptake* of the research by the relevant end-uses to generate new policies, products, processes, attitudes, behaviours and/or outlooks.
>
> Examples:
>
> - Research has contributed to a change in educational practice
> - Research has contributed to a policy, legislative or standards outcome
> - Research has generated public debate that has influenced public opinion on major social issues
>
> How and to what extent the research has produced social, economic, environmental and/or cultural *benefits* regionally, nationally and/or internationally
>
> Examples:
>
> > Research that has made a major contribution to a policy, legislative or professional practice outcome that has produced a substantial or outstanding level of measurable benefit
> >
> > Media or communications, such as the development of electronic communications and resources, that has resulted in significant or outstanding benefit
> >
> > (adapted from DEST, 2007, p.102)

We think that most educational researchers conduct research with the aim of making a difference (an impact) of some kind on the field, which may be in relation to understanding, practice, and/or policy. However in saying this we are not arguing that only 'useful' research or research that can demonstrate 'use' is good research. As Donovan (2005a) suggests, too often what government and the public want from the social sciences, of which Education is probably the most visible, is a quick fix to a problem that has been identified (often in the popular press and not always informed by research); problems that shift with shifting priorities and governments. Not being able to provide the simple answer has often attracted

charges of irrelevance from critics of educational research, who can be located both within and outside of the academy (see, for example, Neil Eckardt's argument in Teachers College Record, 2007).

Problems in education are rarely simple and, as Whitty (2006) suggests, 'even research that is centrally concerned with improving practice and supporting teachers – in whatever phase of education – needs to be more diverse in its nature than the rhetoric of "what works" sometimes seems to imply' (p.162). He also argues that there should be room for education research that challenges 'prevailing assumptions', that is not aligned with government (and, we would add, education system) priorities.

Moreover, as Holbrook points out, 'in general, a "linear model" of impact has not been found to apply in education (NBEET 1992, Selden 1997, DETYA 2000, National Research Council 2002). Proving that it was "research X that led to outcome Y" is hugely problematic' (Holbrook 2007, p.3). In support of her case, Holbrook (2007, p.3) quotes a recent report by the National Research Council in the USA (2002, pp. 154-155):

> The effect of social science on practice is typically indirect, affecting change incrementally through 'knowledge creep' … The scholarly literature on research utilisation also suggests that local application of knowledge is a long-term process that involves changes in practitioners' beliefs as well as in their procedural skill for implementing that knowledge … And how to spark large-scale change in the U.S. education system—research-based or otherwise—is not well understood.

In short, the relationship between policy and research and between policy makers and researchers has been widely discussed as extremely problematic (Levin, 2006; Whitty, 2006). As Holbrook suggests, 'diffusion of information is more likely than direct take up and implementation'. She points out that:

> with end-user research … the outcomes will prove elusive even when researchers set out to "tag" its course. It is particularly difficult to determine if a change or benefit comes about *exclusively* as a result of one study or even a program of research. (Holbrook 2007, p.4, emphasis in original)

Conclusion

The issue of the utility or relevance of educational research, particularly that which is funded by government, is not new. As an 'applied' discipline, there has been a constant refrain that educational research should be able to provide solutions; that is, demonstrate its capacity to inform policy and practice in observable and measurable ways. Bessant and Holbrook quote Bessant writing in 1981, for example:

> Across the world, educational research is now an integral part of modern administrative procedure. Increased investment in research has led to … a concern that the conduct, organisation and funding of research should be directed towards maximising its effect on policy and practice. (Nesbit 1981, in Bessant & Holbrook, 1995, p.246)

Similarly, in Australia, the UK and North America, the dominance (until the early 1980s) of psychology in education led to an expectation that empirical research should have applicability in education contexts, providing evidence of 'what works' that could be drawn on for policy and practice. Ironically, Bessant and Holbrook (1995) suggest that it was the

scientifically inspired behavioural psychology in education of the 1960s and 1970s that first attracted criticisms of irrelevance. Education psychologists were victims of their own rhetoric. They could not provide the 'universal truths' that politicians and bureaucrats were wanting, the kind 'that hits the nail on the head and tells you pretty clearly what is wrong or what is happening and what should be done' (Bessant & Holbrook 1995). Husén provides a more general assessment:

> Those who turn to social science research in order to find out about the 'best' pedagogy or the most 'efficient' methods of teaching are in a way victims of the traditional science which claimed to be able to arrive at generalizations applicable in practically every context. (Husén, in Bessant & Holbrook 1995, p. 234)

Partially in response to criticisms of relevance and also through the influence of critical theory, more located forms of research (such as action research and case study research) were developed to work with teachers (as well as administrators, students, parents, and whole schools) to bring about change at the local level. The imperative was no longer simply 'what works' but also 'under what conditions, why and how' (Alton-Lee 2004); research that is specific to particular populations, contexts and educational purposes. This research did not easily conform to traditional university notions of research and could not always claim the indicators that universities valued (such as competitive research funds, publications in international refereed journals, citations, and so on). Still, it can certainly argue for its relevance to practice and its local impact on schools and teachers and the educational outcomes and well-being of students (e.g. see Groundwater-Smith 2000 and her other work in teacher professional learning and practitioner research). Initially it was hoped that recognition of 'impact' in the RQF would benefit such research. However, as Figure 1 (above) illustrates, impact in the RQF was hierarchically conceived in large part on geographical spread: nationally and internationally. While local impact can be scored, it is unlikely to achieve more than a C or D. That is, much education research with potential to make a real difference – indeed, with evidence of making a real difference – was not likely to score very well (and certainly not highly) on the RQF's impact scales.

But the issue for education research (and discipline-specific research more generally) is not just how its impact is to be ranked against the impact of other forms of research. The RQF model of impact also placed a great deal of emphasis on the verifiability of impact claims by 'end-users'. Like the UK's RAE, places were created on RQF assessment panels for 'end-users' of research. In Maton's (2005) terms, research assessment that measures impact in this way no longer constitutes just a challenge to relational autonomy in higher education; to the ways in which research is done. Inserting end-users into the mix as arbiters of research impact also represents a challenge to the positional autonomy of the field, reordering who has authority to legitimate particular forms of research. That is, there is now greater potential for judgments about research maters to be made from outside the field, which could have deleterious effects on research that matters. As Paechter (2003, p.111) argues:

> The relationship between what one might call the producers of research, the research itself and the users of research is complex … expecting 'users' to be the judges of what matters may lead away from forms of research that are in the long term very important.

Deferring to the judgements of end-users also has implications for what constitutes research evidence (eg. the USA's 'No Child Left Behind' preference for statistical data and analysis)

and how such evidence is best understood. Following Hanna Arendt, Nixon, Walker and Clough (2003) argue for research as a thoughtful practice:

> Research exists not only to provide policy makers and practitioners with evidence, but to provide as a public resource interpretations of that evidence that speak to the conditions pertaining at precise points and within specific public actors. … research is a common resource, a resource for thoughtful action.

There is also the sticky issue of how education researchers can demonstrate the 'impact' of education research that has fostered debate, changed ways of thinking, assisted practitioners and parents – indeed, all of those involved in education in the broadest possible way – to make good judgements. If we are to accept that research impact involves more than the up-take of a new 'widget', that it might influence how we think about the complexities of the social world (including complex education contexts), how do we know what 'evidence', what knowledge, provoked what thoughts? Such matters are far more straightforward in the natural sciences, where research produces products that are put to use in industry, often with great effect. The model of 'impact' privileged by the RQF – and, we would argue, most models of research utility – is one that favours adoption and then demonstrable benefit. While Category C (see Figure 1) does allow for the 'adoption' of research 'to produce … new attitudes and behaviours and/or outlooks in the end user community', who is the end user community to make this judgement and what if the research challenges the dominant view, in a field where ideas are well entrenched.

In universities characterised by strong relational and positional autonomy (see Maton, 2005), these issues are less of a concern. University research could and should, provide resources for independent thought. However in the current context of narrow accountability for public funding and with verifiable adoption by end users narrowly defined as representatives of practitioners and policy makers, such independence is under threat. Particular political and social expectations of education by governments and education systems at particular moments (and these often change rapidly with changes of government and trends), can define problems and issues and make judgements that can serve specific end-users.

As Geoff Whitty (2006), in his presidential address to BERA, says: 'while some of our work will be aligned in various ways to the [UK] Government's agenda, some of it will necessarily be regarded by government as irrelevant or useless … [and] some of it may well be seen as oppositional' (p.162). He argues that universities must 'defend an inclusive concept of education' and urges BERA to 'resist any pressure to restrict what counts as research in education' (Whitty 2006). We argue similarly. Much is to be gained by an approach that legitimates and appropriately funds a full range of education research and which recognizes the differences in research and research impact associated with different disciplines. However, how far resistance of this order will be possible, in a context of increasing challenge to relational and now positional autonomy in Australian higher education, is increasingly in doubt.

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