

## EDUCATION ACADEMICS : RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

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I don't believe that there is anything particularly original about what I have to say about policy and academe, in particular education academics. I think you will have heard much of this before. Many of the issues I will discuss have been circulating within the education community for years – including through the 1992 review of educational research; through a spate of articles some years ago promulgating what was once described as the 'awful reputation' of education research; and through a study commissioned by the Commonwealth more than a decade ago into the Impact of Education Research. There is now a new phase of surveillance and critique of teacher education through the auspices of TEMAG (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group).

Let me share with you some thoughts on the relationship between policy and research, in particular educational policy and education research, in the form of a series of rules.

#### **Rule Number 1: Academics should lead the policy debates in education not just be engaging in the debate or waiting for an invitation to contribute as a stakeholder.**

Policy making is about a contestability of ideas. The ideas that win favour with Ministers and Governments are most likely to become policy and be implemented. The ideas that win favour with the media and the broader community may influence Ministers and Governments, if they fit within certain ideological parameters, but even when they don't, in this era of 'democratic policy making' in which decisions are based on what the public wants rather than any real evidence-based approach, those ideas may end up winning. Governments are seduced by the 'popular' and the wiles of the loudest and most influential lobby group, and policy is often implemented that reflects the populist position rather than adoption of an approach that is a more logical outcome of existing evidence.

Public service departments are quite aware and focused on contestability in terms of influencing Ministers and Government decisions in policy. They know that there is a 'clear and present danger' that the Think Tanks that have emerged over the past decade are leading the policy debates, rather than public servants. Think Tanks have been established that openly feed the policy directions and ideologies of each side of politics.

A risk in the ascendancy of this group of knowledge workers in the contest for ideas, is that the public service is marginalised, becomes redundant or mere program managers, rather than highly qualified, well-informed and skilled creators and instigators in the policy cycle.

I think there is a similar risk for academics, particularly education academics. The risk is that your contributions through research, scholarship and thought are marginalised or ignored, or indeed unknown and that, as a result, you are incredibly vulnerable, both by virtue of your potential lack of

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influence and relevance but also because of universities' dependence on governments – for funding, for regulation, and for positioning within many other competing budget priorities.

I believe this risk is already a well-entrenched reality in education and I think that this should be a serious concern to you. Think tanks such as the Grattan Institute, Australia Institute; Sydney Institute; private research organisations and consultancy companies such as ACER, KPMG, Phillips KPA or Learning First; lobby groups such as the Business Council of Australia or ACCI and principals' associations and non-government schools associations; are all actively engaged in education policy space. There are many voices competing to be heard and putting out evidence to substantiate their position on a range of educational issues.

The latest new kid on the block in this space could be AITSL (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership). The recent TEMAG report *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* identified what was described as a 'lack of reliable research relating to initial teacher education and teacher practices'. The Australian Government response to the report was to instruct AITSL to establish a 'national focus on research into teacher education in Australia'. I really can't tell you what that will mean, but one possibility is that AITSL itself moves into research in direct competition with you.

The more likely possibility is that AITSL will tender out research projects because it does not have the internal capacity to undertake such research. This should be seen as an opportunity for education academics, but be assured you will not be alone in the tendering process – many of the organisations that I have already mentioned will be competing with you for that research and evaluation work.

You are in competition with knowledge workers from all of these organisations and whilst I fear that they are currently winning the battle for ideas – you are in a position to respond to this as an opportunity rather than just seeing it as a threat.

For universities to take up the leadership in the current and emerging policy debates, academics need to think seriously about how and where they position their research and scholarship, and that of their greatest resource-base – their postgraduate students.

## **Rule Number 2: Education research should be framed in response to real or perceived and emerging education problems and issues.**

This sounds so obvious, but I am afraid that if it is, it is not reflected in some of the educational research that is coming from Australian universities. When I scan through education journals and some of the topics of postgraduate students' research, I am not sure that a good amount of education research meets this rule.

So much depends on what choices are made for research – for both you as academics and postgraduates. So I ask: Are you asking, as researchers and supervisors, what problems in schools and early learning centres need solutions; what issues are important to practitioners, students, parents and other stakeholders? In a globalised education community, are you surveying what issues are being tested, assessed and focused on in other countries and by bodies like the OECD, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Innovation Unit and the Khan Academy. What issues are Australian policy makers currently interested in? What education issues are consuming space in the media? And what issues are dominating the political agenda of the major parties?

Responsiveness means that you need to understand a particular Government's philosophical and policy agenda. I am not asking you to accept that agenda, but you must understand it and understand where your research ideas might fit in to that agenda.

There has been a great opportunity for academic research over the past decade as the global move in government policy making has been for the adoption of 'evidence-based policy making'. This was a specifically stated operating principle for the Rudd and Gillard Labor Governments, but for both governments it was more often a rhetorical commitment than a lived reality.

Whilst an admirable and desirable goal, evidence-based policy making is predicated on the idea that there is time to actually collect and then sift through the available evidence in relation to any particular issue. An excellent example in this regard was the policy called Building the Education Revolution (BER) – the biggest school infrastructure program this country will ever see. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) hit, the call for major fiscal stimulus was made around the world, including by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As a senior bureaucrat and the first National Coordinator of BER, I had an incredibly short time in which to create a programme to hand out \$16.2 billion to schools across the country. I certainly had no time to look at what the research evidence said about best practice in rolling out school infrastructure or even what the greatest needs were in school infrastructure.

The reality of my life as a bureaucrat was that I was as much engaged in what Thompson and Wildavsky (1986) called information-rejection as in information collection or absorption. The real world of Canberra policy making means that any aids and assistance in building the evidence base for policy would need to be relevant to the concerns of the day and timely in their availability. There are clearly tensions and inconsistencies embedded in an evidence-based approach, but I think that you as academics need to be aware that you can engage and make a difference in policy directions, if your research is ready and able to respond to the particular policy agenda of a government.

A practical and strategic way that I would suggest for academics to respond to this need is that education academics actually create policy. Why can't Education Faculties have a 'treasure chest' or more appropriately named, a data base, of appropriate education policies online so that when politicians are looking to develop education policy platforms, they draw on the data base for policy that is evidence-based and responsive to real issues in the Australian community. In the months leading up to a Budget, public servants are regularly called upon to develop what are new policy proposals – they could also call upon this database. Yes you would be putting your intellectual property out for free so that anyone could use them. But you do that now in education journals. Yes it may mean that you are not properly acknowledged, as politicians and bureaucrats do what Alan Luke has described as 'policy borrowing', but that already happens now.

### **Rule Number 3: Educational researchers cannot afford to merely follow their own interests in research.**

Whilst it has been a dominant paradigm of research, particularly in the social sciences, I believe that it is a luxury that the contemporary academic cannot afford.

Researcher interest alone is problematic if it is the only rationale for an academic's research agenda. It may be a factor, but it should not be the only driver.

I would ask you to reflect on how your current research sits in current policy debates and how it may be contributing to emerging agendas in your discipline. How have your research interests changed and evolved over the years from your initial research as a postgraduate student? Are you still focused on the same area as your PhD research? It may be that you are and you are still right at the centre of current policy debates, but equally it may be that you are and your research agenda is no longer responsive, relevant or contributing to current or emerging policy areas.

Then there is a bigger question of whether those who make up what is possibly the largest single group involved in educational research, namely postgraduate students, are sufficiently attuned to and responsive to current and emerging broader policy issues.

I believe that the choice of research topics for postgraduate students in education is an area where some attention is needed. How do your research students make a choice about a research topic? How much leadership or guidance do you provide in their selection of topics? Should their personal interests be the major driver for research topics?

At a guess I would think that personal interest drives the research interests of most students. Indeed I have given the advice to prospective PhD students myself – don't embark on a topic that you don't care about – you will be doing this work for a number of years, make sure it is something

you are passionate about. I am now at the point where I seriously question passion and interest as the appropriate major drivers of postgraduate research in education.

A number of factors influence the process of topic selection. So much depends on who is around to supervise students – what interests and expertise academic staff might have; who has already laden workloads and who does not.

I am sure someone has investigated how long it takes students in different disciplines to settle on a research question or focus. It would be my strong suspicion that topic development takes a considerably longer time in the social sciences and humanities than it does in the other sciences - engineering, biosciences or physics. Completion times are very important in today's university – not only to the Faculty and administrators but also to students. The opportunity cost of a lengthy research experience is significant for all postgraduate students, but may be more so for those studying part-time, such as many would be in this Faculty.

Some students come to you with a topic firmly in mind. But more normally students begin their research journey by having in mind a general area of interest and shaping that by doing a literature review to see what has been done on a particular topic. I would suggest that an earlier stage is needed – almost a needs analysis - a review of the problems or issues in education which require further investigation. Most students will require direction in this, and there is a role for you as directors of research and supervisors, in guiding them in this.

So, why not provide a bank of topics for postgraduate students, devised by academics, which clearly build understandings around key areas of current and emerging policy interest. If a student joins a team in many science labs to do postgraduate research, they are most often given a manageable and containable slice of a larger project. Why can't that model be adopted in education?

It could work like this. Academics would spend time mapping the landscape of their discipline to determine what is known, what needs to be known, what we don't know enough about and what we think are emerging as areas of policy importance. From there a comprehensive set of research questions could be developed – and then offered to students at both Masters and Doctoral levels.

I would argue that both the Faculty and the students would benefit from such an approach – the Faculty builds a reputation in the media, community and in government around key policy areas because there is a critical mass of students investigating relevant policy topics. Time poor students would benefit from having a clear focus early in their time as a postgraduate student, and they have the incentive of knowing that their work is relevant, current and contributing to knowledge and understanding in educational policy.

**Rule Number 4: Educational research should be strategic in terms of both its substance and timeliness.**

Whilst I see a real need for educational research to be responsive to current needs, it will equally be at risk if it does not look to the future as well.

This really goes to the heart of the incredibly fraught issue of research impact. What research will have the most significant impact and when will it be needed? This means that there needs to be some level of forecasting – what problems/issues will be important in two years' time when the research is complete – what research needs to be done now to inform the debate in two years' time. This is not to deny that there has been and should be educational research which actually leads the way in terms of changing educational practice and thinking.

The research topics being pursued by individual academics at a School or Faculty level could also be looked at strategically to see how they fit with others across the Faculty – and this of course may already be happening here.

The notion of research concentration or critical mass in research has been a controversial one, particularly where it drives funding as it has done at various points in the UK. There are some who

would claim that a critical mass approach dampens innovation, blue sky thinking and creativity in research. There are others who have argued that it is highly correlated with quality and will encourage a collaborative approach which is more likely to result in the best research outcomes.

What I am suggesting goes more to the idea that there is a conscious strategic approach to research across the Faculty in the interests of influencing policy making. One way of doing this would be to look at some level of complementarity in research by academics and students.

Some research was commissioned by DETYA early last decade into the impact of educational research – and to be honest, I have not checked to see if its findings have been challenged or validated more recently. One of the studies within that tome-like volume found clear trends in the research topics being undertaken by postgraduate students in education and the research methods being adopted. One study (Holbrook) found that large-scale, quantitative research was declining relative to smaller, more focused qualitative studies. It should be no surprise that many postgraduate students don't opt for large-scale quantitative research because of the cost and time involved. But there is a place for such studies and there is arguably a place for academics to look to filling that gap, looking at how to complement the sort of research being done by postgraduates, both methodologically and by topic, with other research and research approaches that are needed.

### **Rule Number 5: More educational researchers need to think and act as public intellectuals not just as researchers.**

There have been occasional calls for the university researcher to grab the mantle of public intellectual. Gramsci saw a place for all people as public intellectuals. Henry Giroux maintains a constant call for teachers to become transformative intellectuals – but this doesn't need to be confined to the classroom context.

I believe there is a need for more educational researchers to position themselves as public intellectuals so that they can inform the political and policy agenda on education more effectively and more openly. Some of you are doing this very effectively already – the evidence is there for all to see in the summaries of staff media coverage – so many of you are speaking out in public settings. But let me expand on where I think this role could be taken.

Academic education research should be publicised in broader forums than academic journals. The number of university academics who can direct the debate or have an impact on educational policy directions from the comfort of their office is limited. One has to reach out to community and public forums to become a public intellectual, rather than limiting your views to conversations within a small tribe of academics within a particular topic area within a discipline. Educational researchers need to become such public advocates as well – speaking to the world about their research.

In part, I think educational researchers have to address the perception, totally misguided as it may be, that educational research is not relevant or adding any value to the real work or grassroots of education. The bad press has come in part from within, as evidenced by the now infamous speech by David Hargreaves to the UK Teacher Training Agency in 1996, in which he argued that educational research was non-cumulative, not useful for improving schools and generally lacking in quality. His views were followed by a virtual avalanche of commentary and studies, particularly in the UK, that examined the quality of educational research. Some of this commentary laid the blame at the feet of the funding agencies and processes of UK research, namely HEFCE and the RAE. There may be some of you who feel similarly disenfranchised by current funding arrangements in Australia.

The point I would like to draw from this, is that even if I accept that much of the educational research conducted in Australia is of a very high quality, there is definitely room for you to 'sell' your research, its findings and relevance, to ensure that the community and Government understands what you are doing and the benefits to them and their children of what you are researching.

Whilst there is no need for every educational researcher to become a public intellectual, there is a place for every piece of good educational research to reach more people. I have a particular concern about dissemination in terms of the trend in education for participative research. The

growth in action research/reflective practice models, particularly in the last two decades, has meant that often the significance of the research findings/outcomes are limited to the individual practitioner or perhaps at most her/his immediate colleagues.

I think that there is a role for professional organisations such as AARE and networks of departments and faculties, whether through formal alliances such as the ATN, state based alliances or through informal associations – to pull together the findings of work by individual action researchers and disseminate them in creative ways, so that more people can benefit from the good work that is being done. There need to be more attempts to build on existing knowledge, framed around an understanding that knowledge is cumulative and transferable not merely isolated moments of individual revelation.

In large part, all of the **Rules** that I have outlined are about claiming and gaining greater visibility for education academics and students in the national and state policy space.

I think that academics and postgraduate students in education should be consciously positioned to influence current and future policy. Through your research you can be contributing to the foundations for building the evidence base for good policy in education, and through your research and scholarship, you can be seen, where necessary, to publicly challenge the status quo in policy both now and in the future. All of this is more likely to ensure that we achieve the very best outcomes for all in education in Australia.