

Summary Report from the Peer Learning Activity on ‘Evidence-based Policy and Practice’ in The Hague, Netherlands, 30 May-1 June 2007

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1. Introduction

Representatives from a range of EU countries assembled in the Hague in May 2007 for a three-day Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on ‘Evidence-based Policy and Practice in Education and Training’. The purpose of the event was to bring together Member States with an interest in this area to share practices and ideas, identify common basic principles and develop ideas for future proposals. The event built upon a number of recent developments within the EU:

- the collaboration between six EU/OECD countries interested in ‘evidence-based education’ under the leadership of the Dutch government in 2006-07
- the staging of an EU conference on ‘Knowledge for Action in Education and Training’ under the German presidency in March 2007
- the forthcoming European Commission Staff Working Document on ‘Strengthening the Knowledge Base for Policy and Practice in Education and Training’ in September 2007.

This paper seeks to summarise the key themes that emerged during the event and outline the ideas that arose in relation to future possibilities. It begins with a brief description of the structure and content of the PLA.

2. The Peer Learning Activity

The participants at this PLA comprised governmental and non-governmental representatives from 12 Member States (AT, BE, DE, DK, EE, FI, IT, LT, NL, PL, SK, UK) as well as individuals from the EC, ETF and ETUC and two independent consultants. The event began with an introductory session covering the origins and purposes of the PLA and the preceding work undertaken by group of six EU/OECD countries. Then followed three half-day sessions focused respectively on the issues of: knowledge creation, knowledge dissemination and knowledge application.

Each of these sessions opened with a brief introductory overview by the EC consultant, which set the scene for two Member State presentations with reflections from another Member State representative. At two points during the event, there were additional inputs from local speakers involved in projects closely related to the themes under discussion. The physical location of the PLA was dynamic in the sense that each session took place in a different institutional setting: a government ministry, a research organisation and a high school. The event ended with a final session exploring individual and collective outcomes and implications.

3. Discussion Themes

Knowledge Creation: Contexts, Competition and Conflicts

Contexts – Not surprisingly, the discussions about knowledge creation at the PLA raised some important issues relating to context. The presentation by *Eugenijus Butkus (Science Council of Lithuania)* and discussant comments from *Jean-Raymond Masson (European Training Foundation)*, for example, flagged up a number of points about the dynamics of education research in new Member States:

- there is an important difference between seeking to improve educational research (more established Member States) and seeking to establish a field of educational research (newer Member States)
- developing educational research in post-Soviet states is part of a wider reconstruction of social science research following the dismantling of previous ideological value systems
- there is a common paradox in many new Member States: keen focus on increasing participation in Higher Education but little investment in research and development.

Further discussions of these issues within the group raised the wider point of countries' trajectories with respect to evidence-based policy and practice (EBPP). The key idea was the need to think in terms of what shortcuts might be possible for newer Member States and other countries that are beginning to look at the EBPP issues. For example, how could a country like Lithuania draw on the experiences of countries like Finland, Denmark and the UK to develop educational research in a way that takes strong account of relevance, quality and impact from the outset?

Competition – *Lorenz Lasnigg's (Institut für Höhere Studien, Austria)* presentation referred to the poor visibility of educational research in Austria in terms of funding streams and research structures. This raised wider questions about competition for resources and the setting of educational research priorities, in particular:

- where educational research sits in relation to other *research priorities*
- where educational research sits in relation to other *educational priorities*.

The need to develop realistic assessments of, and robust arguments to challenge, the current priorities in relation to each of these questions was seen by many as a crucial starting point for moving forward with EBPP developments at EU and Member State level. That said, the difficulty of seeking consensus between, or even within, the communities of research, policy and practice were widely acknowledged. Another issue raised was the need to better understand the ways in which different funding sources (governmental, private sector, charitable foundations etc.) and commissioning procedures (programmes, centres, projects etc.) impact upon research relevance and quality.

Conflicts – Informal contributions from a number of participants highlighted the way in which efforts to improve educational research can bring about tensions between conflicting goals. Two examples stemming from the Finnish context concerned:

- *quantity versus quality* - efforts to improve the quantity of research in terms of number of publications/citations can be at odds with efforts to improve the quality of research outputs in terms of methodological developments
- *quality versus relevance* – focusing on improving academic indicators of quality such as publications in international journals can be in tension with attempts to enhance relevance/accessibility as the former requires publication in English while the latter requires publication in Finnish.

Knowledge Dissemination: Creativity, Customers and Careers

Creativity – The presentations by *Jorrit de Jong (Centre for Government Studies, University of Leiden, Netherlands)* and *Karren Hancock (Department for Education and Skills, England)* both underlined the need for all players in the knowledge cycle to develop new ways of working. Through the example of an innovative action-orientated research project undertaken by the Kafka Brigade (www.kafkabrigade.nl), Jorrit de Jong illustrated the need for researchers to think creatively about their:

- starting points – practical end-user problems rather than abstract conceptual issues
- processes – involving potential users in and with the research throughout the process
- outputs – a decision-makers’ forum event rather than a written report.

In a similar way, Karren Hancock’s description of recent efforts within England to improve policy-makers’ skills in analysis and use of evidence gave examples of new ways of working in government (see more in relation to Careers below).

Customers – A second theme that emerged in relation to dissemination/mediation was the importance of thinking carefully and subtly about different kinds of research users (or, to keep up the pattern of words commencing with ‘c’, customers). It was clear from *Andrew Morris’ (CfBT Education Trust, England)* presentation on Clearinghouses, Networks and Portals that a vast range of mediating mechanisms and mediating artefacts are being developed in education as well as health and social care. Examples included:

- moving from research reports to tools for practitioners
- moving from clearinghouses to user-focused portals
- moving from creating products to shaping processes
- moving from few to many types of research outputs.

Careers – It also became clear that research dissemination/mediation requires the development of new kinds of expertise and new types of career pathways. The example of developments within the DfES in England illustrated efforts to develop analysts’ skills in understanding and using evidence. This comes as part of wider efforts to modernise government and improve policy-making and has involved the introduction of a new ‘Professional Skills for Government’ auditing framework and an online staff learning package focused specifically on analysis and use of evidence. There were also examples from elsewhere of schemes to promote secondments and exchanges between academic institutions and government departments, and some references to the fostering of new professional identities of brokers, mediators and boundary-crossers.

Knowledge Application: Coercion, Culture and Curiosity

Coercion – The question of incentives was raised by several presenters and participants in relation to improving the application or use of knowledge. The term coercion, then, is used to remind us of what we do *not* need: research use is essentially about professional learning and so needs to be incentivised rather than coerced. The presentation about the *Talent Centre, a local partnership between Johan de Witt Group Secondary School and the University of Leiden*, suggested that incentives might be thought of in two different ways:

(i) factors that *encourage* people to want to engage with research such as wanting to solve a problem or make one's work more interesting or improve one's professional status

(ii) factors that *enable* people to overcome barriers to research use such as being given protected time, research training, role models/champions and recognition/rewards.

The work of the Kafka Brigade (mentioned above) illustrated several of these factors in the emphasis it placed during the research process on stakeholder involvement/commitment, senior policy-maker support/sponsorship and collaborative exploration of realistic possibilities for change.

Culture – In talking about the use of research within Finnish teacher education, *Jouni Valijarvi (University of Jyväskylä, Finland)* made clear that research was important not only in terms of *content* and *methods* but also in terms of *attitudes*. In other words, the development of a research mindset (attitude) was as important as an engagement with research-based ideas (content) and research skills/processes (methods). This underlines the affective dimensions of knowledge application and connects with wider arguments about the importance of creating and developing organisational cultures that value and use research. It also highlights the need for research use to move beyond the individual (pockets or secret gardens) to the institutional (communities or integrated ecosystems).

Curiosity – That we don't know enough about whether and how research evidence is used by different professional groups in education was a point agreed upon by many at the PLA. There is a need, then, for greater exploration and reflection about this whole area of knowledge application. Put another way, we need to be more *curious* about issues such as users' needs, contexts, motivations etc., and more *critical* about current support structures, conceptual frameworks and assumptions about roles and boundaries.

4. Future Implications

The key ideas emerging from the PLA's concluding session can be summarised in terms of next steps and ideas/resources.

Next Steps

→ **The EC Staff Working Paper on 'Strengthening the Knowledge Base for Policy and Practice in Education and Training' will be formally adopted in September 2007.** This should provide a helpful impetus for future events and initiatives relating to EBPP.

→ **The Cluster on Making Best Use of Resources should consider taking responsibility for this theme of evidence-based policy and practice (EBPP).** This was seen to be helpful

both to the Cluster (in terms of EBPP providing a powerful framework within which to explore resource use) and EBPP (in terms of ensuring some continuity of attention for this important area).

- **Members of the Cluster and the PLA should use future Cluster group meetings as a further peer learning opportunity.** In particular, to share their responses to the Staff Working Paper and to outline plans relating to EBPP. The question of how PLA learning outcomes can best be shared within home organisations is a critical one to consider.
- **The OCW group of 6 EC/OECD countries will move into a phase of peer review starting with a bilateral process between the Netherlands and Denmark.** It would be helpful for the findings of this process (both substantive and methodological) to be shared with members of the Cluster/PLA.
- **Member States should be aware that there are likely to be forthcoming funding opportunities relating to EBPP.** For example, support for the development of an EU network of brokerage agencies and the staging of Education and Training 2010 National Conferences, some of which could helpfully focus on EBPP.

Ideas and resources

- **Solutions to try:** It is clear that EBPP will require different emphases and strategies in different national contexts. Two suggestions were put forward at the PLA for overcoming challenges of scale (small countries collaborating with other nearby countries with shared educational traditions/histories such as in the Central European Educational Cooperation) and resources (government ministries initiating academic secondments by setting up schemes for doctoral students rather than experienced researchers in the first instance).
- **Examples to share:** Presentations at the PLA flagged up examples of initiatives that could well be informative to others interested in implementing similar kinds of developments. An online learning package for enhancing analysis and use of evidence by civil servants, techniques for involving decision-makers during the research process, and web-based portals for education professionals to access research evidence were three examples. The proposal to collate and share the web addresses for these and other examples is an important action point to follow-up on at the next Cluster Group meeting.
- **Resources to develop:** There was a sense throughout the PLA that while EBPP is complex, challenging and highly contextual, there are nonetheless frameworks and resources that are helpful in making sense and moving forward. In the light of this, there were two suggestions for resources that the Commission, the Cluster, the group of 6 and others might consider developing. These were: (i) some kind of 'EBPP tool kit' that would bring together existing frameworks, models, examples in a dynamic and accessible format; and (ii) some kind of 'EBPP road map' that would illustrate different routes or trajectories towards EBPP with different starting points, phases, short cuts, emphases and so on.