THE SYSTEMIC IMPLICATIONS OF
HOUSING AFFORDABILITY
AND THE TEACHER SHORTAGE

DECADAL PLAN FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSULTATION SUBMISSION

Submission Lead

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Context statement

I am a full professor in the School of Education at UNSW Sydney, having previously worked at ACU and the University of Newcastle (and before that, the NSW Department of Education). I was awarded my PhD (from UoN) in 2008 and have gone on to enjoy a relatively successful academic career with publications, grants, HDR supervision, teaching and service.

Response to consultation questions

1. What are the key areas or issues for future research in each field or sector?

Based on my experience, there are three major areas/issues for the future of educational research in Australia (and arguably globally): i) **critical mass**; ii) **data infrastructure**, and iii) **lobby capacity**.

Critical mass: Despite the presence of Schools of Education (or similar) in all universities, there is a serious absence of a critical mass of active researchers growing large-scale research programs intended to influence to policy and public debate. Too many resources are consumed in small scale projects, often mirroring work being conducted by others elsewhere, and frequently leading to contradictory results, alternative agendas (e.g., competing products to promote to stakeholders) and a dilution of the field's impact. Rather than looking like the field has a commitment to cumulative knowledge growth (standing on the shoulders of giants), it looks like a discipline trying to reinvent the wheel and promote our own version of the solution.

Data infrastructure: Far too much education research is small scale or impossible to reproduce/replicate. Rather than needing another project that interviews 6-12 participants, the field needs to address how we build the data infrastructure to capitalise on the existing data generated so that we can curate more compelling evidence cases. This is not about imposing quantitative standards on qualitative work. Rather, it is about how we, as a field, want to work together to create larger data sets (potentially truncating the new for parallel projects through data access) to highlight the scale and urgency of issues. In addition to building such resources, there is also scope to better engage with education systems and other partners to integrate data through FAIR principles (findability, accessibility, interoperability, reusable) to expand data options and more robust research designs.

Lobbying capacity: The absence of a critical mass of researchers working on key topics, and more specifically a collective voice significantly limits the capacity for lobbying Government. Put simply, consultants and think tanks are more agile, can move much quicker, and are far better at conveying simple (without being simplistic) messaging to government on what to do. As a field, education is too busy infighting (portraying incoherence as a field to an external audience) and pushing egos and individual careers than research programs. If we led with critical mass, robust data infrastructure, and providing the data and evidence necessary for policy decisions, we could be more effective in lobbying decision makers.

2. **What steps should we take to drive short-term gains and long-term advancement in these areas?**

My intention here is to link the steps to the previously identified issues:

Critical mass: The decadal plan offers 'a' not 'the' potential means of consolidating research efforts into a small number of large-scale focal areas (though who gets to decide on those areas remains problematic). This could be one step in building the level of critical mass needed to generate robust data and evidence on urgent topics. For me, what is missing in most institutions is a pathway from project to research program that focuses on growing teams from individuals to collaborations, to labs, networks, and consortiums. This is not about replicating the natural sciences, but about building critical mass working on a series of projects and building a robust knowledge base for decision makers and/or other researchers. This is an institutional move and leads to building entities working on key topics.

In building labs (or other groups) there is a need to reconsider the approach to research training. Many in education like the humanities inspired a 'let a million flowers bloom' approach to supervision. Where a candidate approaches with an interesting idea (often loosely coupled with the supervisor's work), I suggest we have a tighter focus on recruiting into the Lab's (or PI's) research program. This is a subtle (and many would claim to already do it) shift, but one that is explicitly about building critical mass. Does it come at the cost of diversity of HDR projects, possibly (and it does not exclude other approaches, just a distribution of resources). But the benefits are research training in a collaborative environment with others working on similar projects and expertise. The byproduct of this Lab (or other label) pathway model is that institutions build expertise in areas that can lead to collaborations across Labs, institutions and so on with bigger projects (and potentially cross institutional research training and exchange).

Conferences could shift from the Special Interest Group (SIG) type model to a more activity-based agenda, where proposals are submitted for targeted sessions that can then be used to funnel submissions into tighter focused timeslots to further encourage collaboration. If education joined their conferences with other social sciences and humanities (e.g., like the Canadian model of the Social Sciences and Humanities Congress) there is the potential for greater interdisciplinary work.

Data infrastructure: Three key steps: repositories, FAIR principles, and research training.

Repositories. Large-scale public data repositories (e.g. AURIN) show that it is possible to create resources for researchers that enable large scale and more efficient research (e.g., curated data, not each team needing to do it from scratch wasting precious resources and time) than in the past. Currently, based on attendance at AARE annual conference for almost 20 years, there are many projects asking similar questions but all operating at small scale. Establishing a shared data repository that pools existing data assets (including transcripts) can facilitate further analysis (e.g., secondary analysis of data), expanded analysis (combining with other data assets to increase scale or duration of data sources) and new forms of collaboration. This is a cultural and technical change, but if modelled off approaches such as AURIN there might be a way to make it work, and then as more data gets added the value of the resource for researcher increases.

There is a byproduct here for research training. Rather than lengthy delays in ethics approval, and the complications of accessing data through systems, a large-scale repository (especially if coupled with the establishment of more education research labs) would open new models of thesis projects. It might be possible to reanalyse existing data in new ways truncating data generation and allowing for deeper and yet larger analysis of data. Again, if coupled with expansion of labs across institutions, it could also facilitate HDR/ECR exchanges to learn new techniques and approaches with other labs and grow the field's research capacity.

FAIR Principles: If we are going to build our data repositories, we need to establish data protocols (e.g., spatialising data) to enable data linkage (interoperability). This would provide substantial leverage in working with external bodies (e.g., departments of education, government agencies) to integrate data for analysis. Given the volume of data produced in education systems annually, improving access to consolidated data (rather than needing to generate individual data, or signing data licensing agreements) could improve the scale of research in ways never before seen.

Lobbying capacity: We need to improve the training individuals and teams receive in understanding of how policy making works. And then, we need collaboration to facilitate representatives from teams to meet with politicians to put forward proposal (especially if coupled with green or white papers based on robust large-scale research). This would make submissions to government enquiries and budget more compelling.

3. **What mechanisms are most effective for addressing the aims of the Decadal Plan?**

There is a need for greater concentration of expertise and interest in research networks (e.g., labs, consortiums, networks) that build robust research programs in the long-term. We need to build coherence in how we organise our work from research training, ongoing collaborations, and collective voices. In many ways, I touched on steps and mechanisms to achieve these in the above response.

The changes are both technical (how we build labs, organise conferences, HDR programs) and cultural (recruiting HDRs, invest in critical mass not individuals). This is not to say that there are not individually brilliant researchers, or that everyone's research needs to have a policy objective, but as a field, **if we do not retain and expand on our usefulness for policy makers, then others will fill that void**.

Establishing an 'Education Researchers on the Hill' or similar event where key representatives from the field present short showcases to policy makers and meet with key staffers each year would be a fantastic idea. Re-establishing a 'Friends of Education' group in Federal (and arguably state and territory) governments would be useful too. Basically, we need to build pathways for getting robust education research in front of policy makers. But it needs to be research that advocates for work that gets the outcomes it claims (e.g., evidence of success, not just unsubstantiated claims), work that can scale, and ideas that people want.

Thanks for the opportunity to submit to this consultation. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.

Kind regards,
Scott