

# 6

## Linking research, policy and practice: Learning from other sectors

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International learning networks, significant investments in new research, and research synthesis and methodological innovations have led the way in developing work on evidence use in the education sector, particularly at the practice level. However, work on research use can learn from other domains as well. This chapter considers themes across sectors and their implications for education. It is structured in three parts. The first part maps the interactions between research, policy and practice in various sectors. The second draws together the evidence from various initiatives that have had success in facilitating research use. The final part takes these lessons and frames them as five questions, which can help clarify implications for the education sector.

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## Introduction

Education has led the way in developing work on evidence use, particularly at the practice level. International networks (such as the European Union [EU]-funded Evidence Informed Policy and Practice in Education in Europe [EIPPEE] network) have developed research use for education improvement. So too have investments like the William T. Grant Foundation programme for use of research evidence in the United States and the United Kingdom government investment in the Education Endowment Foundation. And methodological innovations such as Research-Practice Partnerships between researchers and practitioners have added to furthering research use in improving education. A recent overview looking across sectors and geographies included two chapters focusing on learning from research use in education (Boaz et al., 2019<sup>[1]</sup>) and there are many more reports, books and journal articles disseminating learning from this work.

There have also been many initiatives and activities to improve links between research and policy from other domains but these tend to be overlooked (Oliver and Boaz, 2019<sup>[2]</sup>). This chapter considers what learning may be relevant and useful to education from other sectors. In particular, it draws on the cross-cutting analysis in *What Works Now*<sup>1</sup> (Boaz et al., 2019<sup>[1]</sup>) and a mapping exercise looking at initiatives designed to promote the use of research in policy (Hopkins et al., 2021<sup>[3]</sup>; Oliver et al., 2022<sup>[4]</sup>).

## Mapping interactions between research, policy and practice

Many researchers and their partners in policy and practice have tried out new ways to promote engagement between decision-making and research evidence. These include secondments and fellowships; collaborative research projects and programmes; and networking and dissemination events. All have been undertaken to increase research use yet few have been evaluated. There is a need for more evidence of the value of investments by our funders, and we need a robust evidence base to help us make better decisions about how to improve research use.

To establish the quality and size of the existing evidence base, we focused on activities undertaken by research organisations, funders, decision making organisations and intermediaries with the goal of promoting academic-policy engagement. We mapped the activities of 513 organisations promoting research-policy engagement between October 2019 and December 2020. To identify relevant activities, we conducted systematic desk-based searches for eight types of organisations (research funders; learned societies; universities; intermediaries policy organisations and bodies; practice organisations and bodies; think tanks and independent research organisations; NGOs and non-profits; and for-profits/consultancies). The search was international but aimed to gather learning with relevance for our own context in the United Kingdom. For each organisation, we reviewed websites and strategy documents, and published evaluations to identify research-policy engagement activities. This systematic search was supported by a stakeholder roundtable, expert interviews and a survey sent to a subset of the sample. Both stakeholder consultation and the survey served to support the quality and robustness of our approach.

To categorise and analyse the data, we drew on the work of Allan Best and Bev Holmes (2010<sup>[5]</sup>). Best and Holmes identify three ways of thinking about improving research use: linear models, relational models, and systemic models. Within these three categories, we also drew on a large systematic review about evidence use to analyse initiatives (Langer, Tripney and Gough, 2016<sup>[6]</sup>).

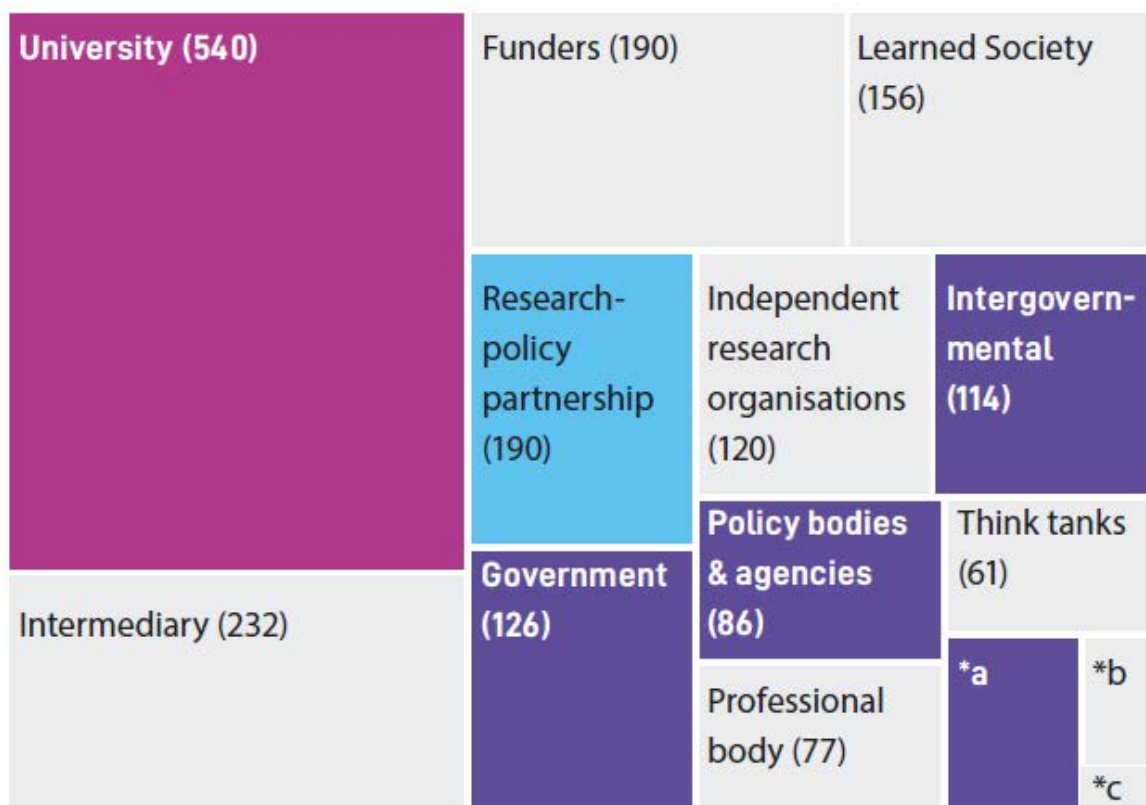
For each identified initiative, we collected data on:

- The initiative and its host organisation (who; where; when; at what cost; funded by whom).

- How it sought to promote academic policy engagement (what specific activities, and what types of practices they were engaged in).
- To what effect (whether there was any evaluation of their activities or other research indicating the impact of these practices).

We identified over 513 organisations around the world including universities, government departments, parliaments, learned societies, research funders, intermediaries, businesses. Their activities spanned a large range of policy areas (see Figure 6.1). While education is not the largest category, we did identify more than 20 organisations promoting academic-policy engagement in education and higher education (with 12 focusing specifically on school-based education).

**Figure 6.1. Types of organisations that host academic-policy engagement**



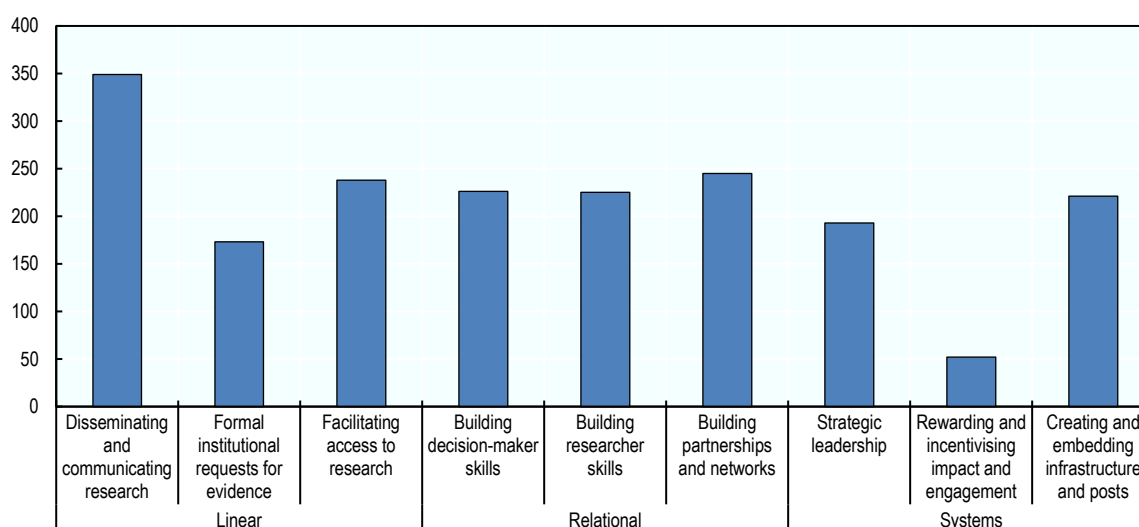
Note: a: Parliamentary initiatives (51); b: Business (21); c: Non-profit initiative (7)

Source: Adapted from Oliver, K. et al. (2022<sup>[4]</sup>), "What works to promote research-policy engagement?", <http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16420918447616>.

We grouped these initiatives into **nine practices** (see the frequency of their use in Figure 6.2) which fall under the three models of improving research use mentioned earlier.

In the next section, we discuss some examples and describe how initiatives are using linear, relational and systems strategies to improve research use in different sectors and contexts. Many initiatives also combine linear, relational and systems elements as part of a multi-dimensional approach.

Figure 6.2. What do research-policy engagement initiatives do?



Source: Adapted from Hopkins, A. et al. (2021<sup>[7]</sup>), *Science Advice in the UK*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.53289/GUTW3567>, p 343.

### Linear approaches

Practices 1-3 all follow the **linear model**. Here, knowledge and research is seen as a commodity that is generated by researchers, turned in to products such as reports or toolkits, and used by decision makers. The process of applying knowledge is seen as a one-way exchange: people who produce research hand it over to research users, who are assumed to be in a knowledge “deficit”. In this way of thinking, effective communication is essential for evidence use. Implicitly, linear models view the process of getting research evidence into policy or practice as fairly predictable and manageable.

We found that most activity and investment is focused on linear approaches. They either push evidence out from academia (*Dissemination and communication*) or pull evidence into government (through *formal evidence requests*, or *facilitating access*). Indeed, producing and disseminating research is the dominant activity and has increased since the late 1990s. Pull mechanisms are used by decision makers to address a particular need. They may use *formal institutional mechanisms* such as science advisory committees or requests for evidence issued through legislatures and consultations (Beswick and Geddes, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>; Hopkins et al., 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). While COVID-19 has made these processes more visible (OECD, 2019<sup>[9]</sup>; Cairney, 2021<sup>[10]</sup>), formal institutional mechanisms have been the primary way that research informs policy making from food safety to building regulation for a long time.

Initiatives may also *facilitate access to research* often through the (co-)commissioning of research and evaluation projects. Beginning in the early 2000s, there has been a large increase in the number of initiatives that support policy to commission more effectively and (mostly since 2015) co-create research or develop briefs through consultation. See examples of linear approaches in Table 6.1 and Box 6.1.

Table 6.1. Examples of initiatives using linear approaches

Organisation	Sector	Country/Region	Activity
Government consultations and requests for evidence	All	Multiple	Governments may request evidence for policy by issuing consultations or other requests on specific policy areas or topics.

Organisation	Sector	Country/Region	Activity
Scientific Advisory Committees	All	Multiple	Scientific advisory committees may be temporary or permanent, involve one type of scientific expertise, or combine expert advice from multiple disciplines to inform policy.
The Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES)	Health	Uganda	ACRES conducts rapid evidence synthesis on key policy topics and in response to decision makers' requests.
Partnership for Evidence and Equity in Responsive Social Systems (PEERSS) (Previously PERLSS)	Development	Multiple	PEERSS is trialling different approaches to improving evidence use in policy to support the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapid evidence synthesis.</li> </ul>
What Works Centres	Social Policy	UK	The 13 What Works Centres comprise a network of social policy evidence centres in the UK. Their work includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducting evidence synthesis.</li> <li>• Publishing evidence briefs, summaries, reports and practice guides.</li> <li>• Creating evidence toolkits and rating systems to help decision makers assess the strength of evidence supporting a programme or practice.</li> </ul>
Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research	Education	Denmark	Based at Aarhus University, the Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research compiles, analyses and disseminates the results of educational research, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducting evidence synthesis.</li> <li>• Publishing evidence briefs, summaries and reports.</li> <li>• Maintaining a registry of Danish and Scandinavian educational research.</li> </ul>
Sax Institute	Health	Australia	The Sax Institute has a number of support tools such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ChangeMap, an approach to helping service-delivery agencies understand and address local barriers to adopting best-practice care.</li> <li>• Analysis for Policy, designed to help health decision makers undertake policy-relevant research using the Institute's longitudinal research study.</li> <li>• Evidence Check, supports policy makers to commission evidence reviews.</li> <li>• Research partnerships including policy and practice stakeholders.</li> </ul>

Note: Some of these initiatives, such as PEERSS and the Sax Institute, also use relational approaches.

Source: Data from Oliver, K. et al. (2022<sup>[4]</sup>), "What works to promote research-policy engagement?", <http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16420918447616>.

### Box 6.1. Demand-led rapid evidence synthesis at The Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES), Uganda

Based at the College of Health Sciences at Makerere University, the Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis provides a mechanism for decision makers to more effectively "pull" evidence in to policy. The response service was the first in a low- and middle-income country and is now modelled in over 15 countries. It aims to engage with all levels of government and support decision-making processes with high-quality and timely evidence.

The service produces policy briefs in response to decision-makers' requests. An evaluation of the service focused on which formats of briefing documents were most useful and acceptable. Mijumi-Deve and colleagues conducted user testing with healthcare policy makers at different levels of decision making, collecting data on useability, usefulness, understandability, desirability, credibility and value of the document. The participants generally found the format of the rapid response briefs useable,

credible, desirable and valuable. However, they also highlighted some issues, including the need for recommendations and a lack of clarity about the type of document and its potential uses.

A process evaluation was also conducted, drawing on interviews with researchers, knowledge translation (KT) specialists and policy makers. This highlighted the different contextual factors that influenced the ability of the service to support health decision making. It found that key internal factors were the design of the service and resources available for it. Key external factors were the service's visibility, integrity and relationships. Finally, the authors pointed to environmental factors that affected its impact, including political will and the Ugandan health system and policy infrastructure.

Source: Mijumbi-Deve, R. et al. (2017<sup>[11]</sup>), "Policymaker experiences with rapid response briefs to address health-system and technology questions in Uganda", <http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s12961-017-0200-1>; Mijumbi-Deve, R. and N. Sewankambo (2017<sup>[12]</sup>), "A process evaluation to assess contextual factors associated with the uptake of a rapid response service to support health systems' decision-making in Uganda", <http://dx.doi.org/10.15171/ijhpm.2017.04>.

### Relational approaches

Practices 4-6 adopt the **relational model**. Here, knowledge production and use is seen as embedded in social relationships and contexts. Initiatives focus on sharing knowledge among diverse stakeholders, and developing networks and partnerships underpinned by common interests and perspectives. Importantly, knowledge sharing is seen as a two-way process, with an appreciation of the different skills and areas of expertise brought by all. While decision makers can learn from researchers and their evidence, researchers also need to learn about policy contexts, issues and priorities.

Investment in relational approaches is more recent and growing. We identified two main types of initiative. Firstly, *building skills* for both policy makers and researchers. Training and professional development focused on academic-policy engagement is an expanding area. Most initiatives are one-offs and support for academics to do engagement is patchy. In the United Kingdom, more attention is now given to training opportunities for academics, government analysts and policy makers to support academic-policy engagement. These are often provided by government, funders or intermediaries. The content of training offers depend on the organisation, its stakeholders and aims. Several examples are included in Table 6.2.

**Table 6.2. Examples of initiatives using relational approaches**

Organisation	Sector	Country/Region	Activity
Natural Environment Research Council CASE studentships	Environment	United Kingdom	CASE studentships provide doctoral students with research training experience within the context of a research collaboration between academic and non-academic partner organisations. Non-academic partners include those from industry, business, public and the third/civil sectors.
University Policy Institutes	Higher education / Policy engagement	United Kingdom	Policy Institutes aim to provide a "one-stop-shop" for policy enquiries and a more strategic approach to policy engagement expertise within universities. Activities may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training researchers in policy engagement and communication.</li> <li>• Recommending experts to provide advice or expertise.</li> <li>• Circulating government requests for evidence and other opportunities.</li> <li>• Publishing blogs and policy briefs.</li> </ul>

Organisation	Sector	Country/ Region	Activity
Cambridge University Centre for Science and Policy(CSaP)	Science / Science Policy	United Kingdom	CSaP aims to build policy makers' research understanding and create opportunities for networking and exchange through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public lectures and seminars.</li> <li>• Policy workshops.</li> <li>• Senior and Junior Policy Fellowship Schemes.</li> <li>• Services to Research initiative which helps researchers at the University build policy-relevant activities into their research proposals.</li> </ul>
American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science and Technology Policy Fellowships	Science / Science Policy	US	The AAAS aims to advance science and serve society through initiatives in science policy, diplomacy, education, career support, public engagement with science, and evidence advocacy. The Science and Technology Policy Fellowships provide opportunities for scientists and engineers to learn about policymaking and contribute their knowledge and analytical skills during a Fellowship placement in the policy realm.
Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)	Science and social science / Policy	United Kingdom	POST is the in-house science advice mechanism in the UK Parliament, which bridges research and policy. It provides: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Horizon scanning, reports and briefings.</li> <li>• Professional training to civil service staff.</li> <li>• Policy internship programme run with UK research councils and others.</li> <li>• Fellowship programmes for doctoral students and for established academics.</li> <li>• Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU) to strengthen connections between research and policy.</li> </ul>
Canadian Science Policy Centre (CSPC)	Science Policy	Canada	The Canadian Science Policy Centre supports stakeholder engagement by bringing together multi-sector expertise through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge exchange activities (e.g. Science meets Parliament Program).</li> <li>• Conferences, policy workshop and events.</li> <li>• Science-Policy Interface programme provides departments with evaluation assistance.</li> <li>• Training, workshops and various knowledge exchange schemes for both scientists and policymakers.</li> <li>• Canadian Science Policy Awards of Excellence.</li> <li>• National science policy network.</li> </ul>
ACED (Actions pour l'Environnement et le Développement Durable)	Environment, agriculture and sustainability	Benin	ACED aims to combine research, policy and local action to reduce poverty and hunger in vulnerable communities. It pilots solutions by collaborating with local communities and agricultural stakeholders. It runs capacity development for decision-makers as part of projects, as well as offering some stand-alone workshops e.g. the Knowledge Sharing and Policy Engagement workshop/
African Evidence Network (AEN)	Multiple	Africa	AEN aims to foster collaboration among those engaged in or supporting evidence-informed decision making (EIDM) and increase knowledge and understanding of EIDM. It does this through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The AEN Network.</li> <li>• Advocating for evidence and for EIDM in Africa.</li> <li>• Knowledge sharing opportunities, seminars and workshops.</li> <li>• Publications.</li> <li>• Online learning space.</li> <li>• African Evidence Leadership Award.</li> </ul>

Organisation	Sector	Country/Region	Activity
UK Policy Research Units	Health and social care	United Kingdom	The UK's 15 Policy Research Units (PRUs) undertake research to inform government and arms-length bodies making policy decisions about health and social care. They support short- and long-term policy development through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multidisciplinary teams.</li> <li>• Long-term partnerships with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC).</li> <li>• Rapid response services.</li> <li>• Policy liaison roles and oversight mechanisms aims to create alignment with long-term departmental priorities.</li> </ul>
Collaborations for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRCs)	Health	United Kingdom	The Collaborations for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRCs) were partnerships between universities and local health service organisations. They trialled different approaches to long-term collaborative working between academic organisations and health services, continuous knowledge production and implementation cycles focused on health improvement, hybrid roles combining research, policy and practice expertise, and capacity building. See Box 6.3.

Source: Data from Oliver, K. et al. (2022<sup>[4]</sup>), "What works to promote research-policy engagement?", <http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16420918447616>.

The UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) also runs the Parliamentary Academic Fellowship Scheme. It provides the opportunity for arts, humanities and social science researchers to be seconded to a parliamentary office to develop a project and work alongside, advise and influence parliamentarians. University policy institutes and teams offer training that ranges from communication and presentation skills, and the practicalities of engagement to building research "impact" and collaboration into projects. Commonly, training for researchers is aimed at early-career academics and is relatively short in duration (averaging 3 months in length). The US marketplace for impact and influence training appears to be the most diverse – a varied range of training, mentorship, advocacy and skills-building programmes are offered by research centres and institutes, independent consultancies and policy bodies (see example in Box 6.2).

### Box 6.2. Science and Technology Policy Fellowships at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)

The AAAS Science and Technology Policy Fellowships provide opportunities for scientists to spend time in government, contributing to federal policy making while learning about the intersection of science and policy. AAAS Fellowships are a long-standing example, running annually since 1973. Fellows spend one year in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the federal government in Washington. The aim is to provide them with hands-on policy experience; support skills development; and foster a network of science and engineering leaders who understand government and policy making. Fellows receive a stipend of USD 80-105 000 per year, publish blogs, and convene thematic workshops and symposia.

In 2020, the programme was retrospectively evaluated.



The evaluation found generally high levels of Fellows' satisfaction with the programme. Over 80% felt it improved their understanding of the intersection between science, technology and policy, and 77% reported it encouraged them to explore a different career path. Fellows reported improved policy know-how and skills, including on the workings of government, policy and science integration and collaborative skills. It also showed that Fellows continued to be involved in policy-related activity after the end of the programme. Mentors based in host offices were also evaluated. It was found that they contributed to the overall office environment and gave their expertise to address complex problems, clarify data interpretations, summarise and translate scientific information, and provide technical input.

Source: Pearl, J. and K. Gareis (2020<sup>[13]</sup>), "A retrospective evaluation of the STPF program", <https://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/STPF%20Evaluation%20Presentation%20PDF.pdf>.

For decision makers, initiatives offer courses, fellowships and other opportunities that aim to build research skills and awareness. For example, the Cambridge University Centre for Science and Policy offer Fellowships for policy makers in which Fellows are given opportunities to meet with a range of researchers from different disciplines, attend workshops and build relationships. Many universities offer support services through policy institutes or teams. Specialist training and capacity building offers are also developed by intermediary organisations that specialise in work across research, policy and practice. ACED (Actions pour l'Environnement et le Développement Durable) in Benin, for example, works collaboratively with local decision makers and offers tailored capacity-building as part of pilot environmental sustainability projects. It also provides stand-alone courses on knowledge sharing.

Secondly, relational initiatives aim to *build professional partnerships* – that is, long-term, non-transactional joint working relationships to foster mutualism and trust across sectors. This includes networking activities that support participants to leverage sustained and useful professional relationships. Examples of this approach include the African Evidence Network (AEN), an intersectoral network of over 3 000 people that has been running for over 15 years. In the last decade or so there have been some relatively rare attempts to develop more formalised partnership approaches in which research and policy or practice organisations come together on a shared work programme. Frequently cited examples in health and social care include the United Kingdom's Policy Research Units, which support short- and long-term policy development and partnership (PIRU, n.d.<sup>[14]</sup>). In practice, the Collaborations for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRCs) provide a long-running example of collaborations that bring together universities and healthcare providers to test new treatments and ways of working (Box 6.3).

### Box 6.3. Partnership and collaboration in the Collaborations for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRCs)

The Collaborations for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRCs) were funded by England's National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) in 2008 and 2014. The collaborations were partnerships between universities and local health service organisations and aimed to improve the quality of healthcare through the production and use of applied health research. The CLAHRC model was focused on experimentation and agenda setting at the local level. Each developed slightly differently, with key health service stakeholders and researchers shaping the focus of work within different local contexts. This aimed to create approaches to evidence production and use that took account of how health care is delivered across sectors and in a defined geographical area. The CLAHRCs drew on lessons from other countries, including Australia and the United States, and aimed to foster collective knowledge mobilisation processes to "improve care through a continuous cycle of knowledge production and implementation".

Central aims of the CLAHRCs were:

- To develop and conduct applied health research that is relevant across the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom, and to translate research findings into improved outcomes for patients.
- To create a distributed model for the conduct and application of applied health research that links those who conduct applied research to those who use it in practice.
- To create and embed approaches to research and its dissemination.
- To increase the country's capacity to conduct high-quality applied health research focused on the needs of patients and targeted at chronic health conditions and public health interventions.
- To improve patient outcomes locally and across the wider NHS.
- To contribute to the country's growth by working with the life sciences industry.

The NIHR commissioned independent longitudinal research evaluations of the early CLAHRCs in 2010 and a number of smaller evaluations were also conducted. In 2018, Kislov and colleagues synthesised the findings of 26 evaluations to draw out overarching learning about the CLAHRCs. The synthesis found that many evaluations focused on describing and exploring the nature of the partnerships, and the vision, values, structures and processes developed to facilitate sustained collaboration between academic and health partners. Evaluations also focused on the nature and role of boundaries between organisations, and the use of knowledge brokers and hybrid roles to support knowledge mobilisation. Some focused on capacity building such as secondment schemes.

Overall, the evaluation synthesis noted a lack of evidence about the impact of CLAHRCs on health care provision and outcomes. The authors highlighted the need for more studies on which knowledge mobilisation approaches work in research and practice partnerships; what the contexts were; and the reasons for success. A further round of funding has led to the creation of Applied Research Collaborations (ARCs) in the place of the CLAHRCs.

Source: Kislov, R. et al. (2018<sup>[15]</sup>), "Learning from the emergence of NIHR Collaborations for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRCs): A systematic review of evaluations", <http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s13012-018-0805-y>; NIHR (2019<sup>[16]</sup>), *About Us*, <https://www.clahrc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk/about-us/>.

## Systems approaches

Practices 7-9 attempt to respond to the **systems model** by recognising that all activities and actors associated with knowledge production and use are embedded within wide and complex systems, working through dynamic systemic processes. Taking a systems-informed approach includes being aware of what needs to be in place to support research use in government, such as a positive culture of research use; rewarded and valued career pathways associated with promotion of evidence use; and a healthy and dynamic research production ecosystem. Systems approaches attempt to create a culture of evidence use that is sustained and productive. These include *strategic leadership and advocacy* for evidence use; the *rewarding and incentivisation* of engagement; and the *creation of infrastructure* to enable impact. Some initiatives work across all three practices. An example might be the research-practice partnerships fostered by the William T Grant Foundation, discussed in Chapter 10 of this publication. See Table 6.3 for examples of different initiatives.

Most initiatives we identified focused on *strategic leadership*; mainly through advocacy initiatives that aim to champion evidence use and engagement. The Bipartisan Policy Center's Evidence Project in the United States provides a good example of successful advocacy and influencing. At a practice level, the examples used most frequently are the Veterans Administration and the Kaiser Permanente health systems, which have sought to build evidence-infused services. There are many other potential aspects of strategic

leadership such as policy planning and cross-sector leadership of which, however, we found very few examples.

A small but growing number of initiatives aim to *reward and incentivise impact*; we identified prizes and professional incentives to recognise impact and engagement between research and policy. Some prizes celebrate “research impact”; for example, the Economic and Social Research Council’s Celebrating Impact Prize in the United Kingdom, which has been running since 2013. Others focus on public policy; for example, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) Public Service Award, which has been running since 1971 (FAS, n.d.<sup>[17]</sup>). The Irish Health Research Board Impact Prize competition is an example of a health-specific award, while the Africa Evidence Network’s African Evidence Leadership Award (launched 2018) is unique in recognising leadership across sectors.

*Creating and embedding infrastructure* covers new roles and career pathways, and supports operations within and across organisations as well as different approaches to embedding expertise. There is little cross-sector activity at a system’s level to promote the use of research. There are also some interesting examples of strategic collaborations between funders, like the EU Scientific Knowledge for Environmental Protection programme, and the Area of Research Interest programme in the United Kingdom.

The creation of new job posts and roles can contribute to the implementation of systems change. Examples include the creation of hybrid, intermediary, brokerage and “boundary spanning” roles. In environmental science and policy, for example, a literature on boundary spanning roles has described how these roles create and develop specialist skill sets that combine expertise about both research and policy, serving a whole host of functions (Posner and Cvitanovic, 2019<sup>[18]</sup>). Brokerage roles are central to the expertise of both government and research teams working together to improve research use. Attempts to embed researchers in practice and policy organisations have sought to make these, or at least the knowledge they generate, sustainable (Graham, Kothari and McCutcheon, 2018<sup>[19]</sup>; Gradinger et al., 2019<sup>[20]</sup>). However, like other initiatives that tackle systems-level challenges, they meet significant barriers in their attempts to change organisational cultures, incentives and infrastructures.

**Table 6.3. Examples of initiatives using systems approaches**

Organisation	Sector	Country / Region	Activity
William T Grant Foundation Research-Practice Partnerships	Education	United States	William T Grant Foundation funds long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations that promote the production and use of research called Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs). RPPs are formal partnerships between research and practice, and can involve schools, education practitioners, researchers, designers and government bodies. They aim to leverage research to address persistent problems of practice by building relationships and trust, creating a shared research agenda, using the research and evidence generated to improve practice.
Bipartisan Policy Center’s Evidence Project	Evidence in policy	United States	The Evidence-Based Policymaking Initiative was created to support the implementation of the US Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking’s initiatives and recommendations. The project published reports, convening and advocacy, and provided expertise on implementation strategies. It was housed within the Bipartisan Policy Center, a non-profit think tank ( <a href="https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/evidenceworks/">https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/evidenceworks/</a> ).
Federation of American Scientists Public Service Award	Science and Security	United States	Established in 1971, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) Public Service Award recognises a statesperson or public interest advocate who has made a distinctive contribution to public policy at the intersection of science and national security ( <a href="https://fas.org/about-fas/awards/">https://fas.org/about-fas/awards/</a> ).
ESRC Celebrating Impact Prize	Science and social science	United Kingdom	The ESRC Celebrating Impact Prize is an annual award which recognises ESRC-funded researchers in achieving and enabling outstanding economic or societal impact from their research ( <a href="https://www.ukri.org/publications/esrc-celebrating-impact-prize-2021/">https://www.ukri.org/publications/esrc-celebrating-impact-prize-2021/</a> ).

Organisation	Sector	Country / Region	Activity
Irish Health Research Board impact prize competition	Health	Ireland	Established in the 2019, the Irish Health Board Impact Award recognises people who use their research to create real changes in health and care. The award looks at the impact of health research in relation to practice, people's health, patient care and health policy ( <a href="https://www.hrb-crcl.ie/2018/08/hrb-impact-award-2019/">https://www.hrb-crcl.ie/2018/08/hrb-impact-award-2019/</a> ).
African Evidence Leadership Award	Evidence in policy	Africa	The African Evidence Leadership Award has been offered annually since 2018 to members of the African Evidence Network who demonstrate leadership in and an influential contribution to evidence-informed decision making in Africa. There are three categories, including evidence producers (e.g. researchers), evidence intermediaries (e.g. knowledge brokers or knowledge translators), and evidence users (e.g. decision makers, private sector leaders) ( <a href="https://aen-website.azurewebsites.net/en/learning-space/article/6/">https://aen-website.azurewebsites.net/en/learning-space/article/6/</a> ).
EU Scientific Knowledge for Environmental Protection – Network of Funding Agencies	Environment	EU	The SKEP ERA-NET project brought together key funders of the national research programmes in different European states to take a forward-looking, strategic overview of the research needs of policy and regulation for environmental protection. It aimed to create structure for research coordination and co-operation between the 14 SKEP partners and provide for effective alignment of national programmes ( <a href="https://ec.europa.eu/research/fp7/pdf/era-net/fact_sheets/fp6/skep_en.pdf">https://ec.europa.eu/research/fp7/pdf/era-net/fact_sheets/fp6/skep_en.pdf</a> ). Activities included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• development and sharing of good practice in the management and dissemination of research</li> <li>• the identification and analysis of common strategic issues</li> <li>• the development and implementation of joint research activities.</li> </ul>
Area of Research Interest	Departmental Policy	United Kingdom	Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) are produced by government departments to provide information about the main research questions they are facing. ARIs aim to align scientific and research evidence from academia with policy development and decision making, support engagement with researchers, and allow departments to access stronger policy evidence bases at better value for money, for example through shared research commissions. In 2019, two Academic Fellows working with the Government Office for Science identified a set of topics based on existing departmental ARIs that should be addressed as a priority during the COVID 19 pandemic. These ARIs were divided into nine themes, which were addressed by nine Working Groups consisting of researchers, funding bodies and policy makers ( <a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/areas-of-research-interest">https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/areas-of-research-interest</a> ).
EVIP-Net, World Health Organisation Evidence-Informed Policy Network	Health	Multiple	EVIPNet was established by WHO in 2005 and is currently active in multiple regions. EVIPNet aims to promote a network of partnerships at the national, regional and global levels to strengthen health systems and improve health outcomes ( <a href="https://www.who.int/initiatives/evidence-informed-policy-network">https://www.who.int/initiatives/evidence-informed-policy-network</a> ). Activities include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity-strengthening strategies to enable policymakers, researchers and civil society representatives to combine political and policy analysis with evidence synthesis and stakeholder engagement.</li> <li>• Country-level teams who produce evidence briefs for policy conduct policy dialogues and undertake rapid evidence synthesis and dissemination.</li> </ul>

Source: Data from Oliver, K. et al. (2022<sup>[4]</sup>), "What works to promote research-policy engagement?", <http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16420918447616>.

## How successful are these approaches? Learning from research and evaluation

### ***Sharing and disseminating research can't improve research use on its own***

Although most money is spent on disseminating and communicating research, accessibility alone is not enough to improve the use of evidence. We now have good evidence on which communications approaches are most successful in helping audiences understand research findings, and we also have an expanding national infrastructure for dissemination across multiple policy areas (Langer, Tripney and Gough, 2016<sup>[6]</sup>). “Push” mechanisms that aim to inform government advice or consultation may be hampered by the low academic and public visibility of Scientific Advisory Committees and Expert Committees (UK Parliament Cabinet Office, 2017<sup>[21]</sup>). Instead, access to formal mechanisms of influence in government occurs through multiple channels and in multiple ways.

### ***Linear models underestimate the complexity of policy environments and evidence use processes***

Linear activities are assumed to operate by providing “missing” evidence. This is what we call the “deficit model”. The underlying logic is that if more evidence were made available, policy makers would act differently. However, it does not fit with what we know about policy processes from political science studies. Instead, policy is influenced by a range of knowledge types over time, which are delivered in different ways. For example, we know that greater dissemination does not equate with greater uptake and that single pieces of evidence are unlikely to change a policy decision. Evaluations suggest that linear approaches to improving evidence use do not address practical, cultural or institutional barriers to engagement.

### ***Relationship building is important for producing useful research and supporting research use in decision making***

Recent investments aim to support government to commission and co-develop research. These projects – as discussed in learning reports generated by the Policy Research Units and the Policy Knowledge Fund, for example – have more potential in conducting both short- and longer-term policy-responsive research. But there are still gaps as to how successful these knowledge production-supporting initiatives are in supporting knowledge use. Without rigorous evaluations we can learn little about the benefits of these substantial investments.

Regarding new training and development initiatives, there is little empirical evidence about what works best in the evidence-use literature. However, we can learn from other sectors. Notably, from evidence on the effectiveness of continuing professional development for teachers and other professional groups.

Networks and knowledge exchange opportunities are growing too. There are more diverse and greater numbers of organisations that provide these opportunities, and learning from other funders and societies will advance research use in decision making.

### ***Collaboration is promising but lacks evidence***

Collaboration appears promising but learning is difficult to capture. Initiatives that aim to build relationships over the long term through partnerships or networks are often limited by insecure or project-based funding. Evaluations of these approaches are limited in the United Kingdom but there is an evidence base on partnerships in the United States, particularly on structuring and embedding learning opportunities in professions and institutions. The CLAHRC evaluations highlighted challenges around embedding secondment schemes in organisations while the Royal College of Policing provides a strong example of embedding training within professional development structures (Hunter, May and Hough, 2017<sup>[22]</sup>).

Some learning has highlighted networks as a potentially powerful mechanism at the practice level (Boaz et al., 2015<sup>[23]</sup>). Few have been robustly evaluated, however, and none test the primary assumption that greater collaboration and co-working between academic and policy audiences will generate more useful, and more used, research. Evaluations do not, so far, support the notion that working in partnerships, which is sometimes costly, is always justified by the outputs, which are themselves hard to measure (Kislov et al., 2018<sup>[15]</sup>). Limited evidence about their effectiveness in sustaining new connections over the long term jeopardises networks, many of which are insecurely funded. There is much to be learnt, particularly from the United States and Africa, about how to run effective collaborations (Cornish, Fransman and Newman, 2017<sup>[24]</sup>) and research-practice partnerships yet little robust empirical evidence about how well these approaches might translate to others contexts, and indeed to government engagement.

### ***Systems-level support can encourage evidence use and relational activity***

What kinds of systems-level activities support activity at the relational level and fresh approaches to strategic leadership within and across sectors? What are the best ways of incentivising engagement and supporting brokers and boundary spanners, and infrastructures? Evidence from healthcare (Bornbaum et al., 2015<sup>[25]</sup>) and climate\_science (Posner and Cvitanovic, 2019<sup>[18]</sup>) highlights several challenges in developing, supporting and measuring the success of intermediary and boundary-spanning roles.

### ***What effective system supports look like across different sectors and contexts***

Cross-sector initiatives are key in strategic leadership but they are rare or in the early stages of development. Higher education organisations are not set up to make the most of individuals who have policy experience. This requires systematic thinking about how to reward and incentivise this across the sector. Systems-levels approaches are hard to implement but allow a more comprehensive use of evidence culture to grow and individual investments to flourish.

## **Cross-cutting themes**

There is a well-described literature on barriers to evidence use in policy and practice (see e.g. Verboom and Baumann (2020<sup>[26]</sup>), Orton et al. (2011<sup>[27]</sup>), Oliver et al. (2014<sup>[28]</sup>)), and on policy and practice decision-making processes (Cairney, 2016<sup>[29]</sup>; Parkhurst, 2017<sup>[30]</sup>). However, many of the initiatives we identified in the mapping exercise do not draw on this literature. There are also very few robust evaluations of initiatives for us to learn from. Overall, we see increasing activity that is uncoordinated and unevaluated. We need to better understand the decision-making context before investing in new initiatives.

To reflect on what we have to learn, we draw on our wider work synthesising and analysing the evidence-use literature (Oliver, Lorenc and Innvær, 2014<sup>[31]</sup>; Boaz et al., 2019<sup>[1]</sup>; Oliver and Boaz, 2019<sup>[2]</sup>). We also reflect on the recent “wake up” call issued by The Global Evidence Commission. It promotes a whole system response to improve the use of evidence in tackling societal challenges (Evidence Commission, 2022<sup>[32]</sup>). The themes represent grand challenges for evidence use across different fields.

The first relates to what counts as evidence when we talk about evidence use for policy and practice. Some organisations and initiatives promote evidence of effectiveness drawn from randomised controlled trials. While this “what works” evidence is valuable to decision makers there continues to be a concern about the potential exclusion of a wide range of other evidence that helps to address the wide range of questions posed by decision makers. As a result, some initiatives, such as the Africa Evidence Network, were set up with an explicit cross-disciplinary approach, aiming to avoid association with a specific form of evidence.

We continue to be surprised by the inability of research to transform policy and practice. While the language may have shifted from evidence-based policy to evidence-informed we still shake our heads in despair that the research remains “on tap” rather than “on top”. It is in this space that initiatives to increase research

literacy in policy and practice communities and vice versa have traction. They help us understand the differences between research, policy and practice environments, and the implications for the ways in which we produce, promote research and understand research use. This is also where we see a value in opportunities to move between worlds of research, policy and practice through work experience, secondments and fellowships. For example, the Cambridge Centre for Science Policy fellowship scheme provides an opportunity for civil servants to spend time at the university on their own programme of work and afterwards to join a growing network of fellows to continue to share learning. Fellows flow in the other direction as well as academics join government departments to learn about how government works.

The way we prioritise and carry out research is likely to impact on its usefulness and use. For example, there is a growing interest in engaging stakeholders in research through approaches such as co-production, action research and partnerships. This work includes both initiatives to include both professional stakeholders (teachers, nurses, government officials) and lay stakeholders (the public, students, patients and carers) in research processes. While some of this work might look tokenistic and focused on academic priorities, other initiatives seek to build deep and sustained partnerships that are mutually beneficial. An example of this is the work undertaken in the United States to build research-practice partnerships in education and in Australia and New Zealand to establish academic practice partnerships in social work. Another approach is to engage stakeholders more systematically in establishing research priorities. The James Lind Alliance in the United Kingdom has developed a process for bringing together patients, carers and clinicians to bring the issues that matter most to the attention of health research funders (James Lind Alliance, n.d.<sup>[33]</sup>).

The importance of thinking about evidence use from a systems perspective is gaining greater attention. We have already improved our approaches to dissemination and established better relationships between the users and producers of research. These efforts need to continue but the next step is to pay greater attention to the systems that produce research and those that use it to make sure they are designed to make the best use of research. This is the next frontier for evidence use. This is a challenging area. We often conclude that evidence use is being thwarted by “contextual factors” and leave it there. We do know about some important systemic factors such as the critical importance of leadership in supporting research use. In particular, the importance of strategic leadership by organisations aiming to promote evidence use (Oliver et al., 2022<sup>[4]</sup>) is a common feature of the literature. The role of individuals as champions and opinion leaders who can support (and also thwart) evidence use is also highlighted in the evidence-to-practice literature (Boaz, Baeza and Fraser, 2016<sup>[34]</sup>). Hopefully, in years to come we will be able to point to the key features of healthy systems to produce and use research (and the connections between them).

We need to pay more attention to concrete policy and practice contexts, and be willing to adapt. Researchers who study “evidence based policy making” (EBPM) tend to identify barriers between their evidence and policy, and describe what a better-designed model of research production and use might look like (Cairney, 2016<sup>[29]</sup>; Parkhurst, 2017<sup>[30]</sup>). In general, we need to get better at working with, and attending to, the policy and practice environments we aim to influence. For example, policy theories describe complex policy-making environments in which it is not clear who the most relevant policy makers are, how they think about policy problems, or the ability policy makers have in turning evidence into policy outcomes. Initiatives should carefully identify relevant policy makers, work (perhaps collaboratively) to frame problems in ways that are relevant or persuasive, and identify opportune moments to try to influence policy. Few initiatives are informed by these concerns, and much training for researchers relies on simplified (linear) models of policy processes.

There are important strategic choices to be made about investments in strengthening evidence use, including clarifying support for individuals, institutions, and systems. In general, initiatives focus on providing support for individuals – whether researchers or decision makers (for example, through training, support in responding to calls for evidence, or funding opportunities). But this fails to address the cultural, institutional and systemic factors that influence how research is produced and used in policy or practice. Moving towards a more systems-informed approach means recognising that different kinds of support will

be needed at different levels, and that we need to think through the relationships between these levels. A recent initiative focused on the institution highlights this point: the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) in the United Kingdom aims to influence the institutional rules and norms that shape policy engagement in universities, for example, through a focus on equality, diversity and inclusion (UPEN, 2021<sup>[35]</sup>). These issues have different implications – and require different strategies to address – when considered at the individual, institutional and systems levels. Taking a more strategic approach means considering the ends as well as the means of work to strengthen research evidence use.

## Implications for the education sector

Our mapping study identified 25 organisations focused on education (including higher education). Many others addressed education as part of a broader or intersectoral agenda (such as children and young people or development). As with the whole dataset, most of these focused on dissemination activities. The Danish Clearinghouse, for example, provides an example of a registry of educational research while the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in the United Kingdom also runs evidence seminars and provides teaching and learning toolkits and support. Other examples focus on formal institutional mechanisms such as the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), which responds to consultation requests for expert input into government processes.

In practice, education initiatives provide some strong examples of relational approaches. In the United States, in particular, we found initiatives aiming to develop and support research-practice partnerships (or RPPs) and design-based education research collaboratives. These approaches emphasise bringing researchers and practitioners together across the life cycle of making and using research. Many models for these kinds of collaboration exist, one approach, funded by the William T Grant Foundation, is supported by a body of research and evaluation evidence that investigates the characteristics, processes and impacts of partnerships (see for example Henrick et al. (2017<sup>[36]</sup>)). We found fewer examples of collaborative, partnership approaches for policy, although EEF, for example, has begun to focus more on work with teachers and practitioners to support implementation. We found a small number of examples of training and certification around evidence use and engagement skills in education (run by the Bloomberg and Mastercard Foundations) and in grant-making skills.

Several education initiatives describe systems-level activities. In higher education, this focuses on the monitoring and analysis of data to support policy and planning by, for example, the Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre (MOSTA) of Lithuania. Key international education stakeholders such as UNESCO play roles in global advocacy and thought leadership, establishing multi-country programmes and research initiatives, and investing in education, science and policy interaction at the international level.

In comparison to sectors such as health (which represents 21.1% of the evaluations we found), public policy (19.3% of evaluations) and the environment (8.8% of evaluations), we found comparatively little evidence supporting education interventions (3.5% of evaluations).

### ***Five questions to strengthen evidence for education***

We identify five questions to inform learning in the education sector, drawing evidence from initiatives in other sectors and the wider research literature.

#### *1. How is research evidence made and shared with education stakeholders?*

Our mapping found relatively few examples of education research being made and shared for education policy and practice stakeholders in demand-led, responsive ways. In health, rapid evidence response services (such as The Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis [ACRES] in Uganda) facilitated commissioning



processes (for example, in Table 6.1) and long-term research-policy partnerships at the national level (including the United Kingdom Policy Research Units). These are examples of different mechanisms that support researchers to generate more policy-relevant research and policy makers to gain access to more timely evidence.

At a more local level, research-practice partnerships and other collaborative approaches in education provide strong examples of ways to involve professional stakeholders (teachers and managers) and lay stakeholders (the public, students and parents) in research processes. There is scope to share learning here as well as to consider which approaches work best in different contexts and why. Learning from education about collaborative approaches is proving useful in other sectors such as social care (Transforming Evidence, n.d.<sup>[37]</sup>).

## *2. What kinds of relationships can support evidence use in education?*

Across sectors, a range of different relationships supports the production and use of research. These include relationships between the communities of research, policy and practice as well as relationships with intermediaries and “boundary spanners” of different kinds (see pages 13 and 16). We found relatively few examples of education researchers, policy makers and practitioners being brought together to learn, share ideas or work together outside of practice initiatives with a predominantly local focus. Fellowship opportunities, secondments, internships and exchange programmes all provide possible pathways to learning across these communities (see Table 6.2). Similarly, education networks might prioritise bringing research, policy and practice communities together to address decision-making priorities, an approach taken by NORRAG (the Network for International Policies and Cooperation in Education and Training in Geneva) for example. While we found a small number of skills-building initiatives in education, there is lots of scope for education to learn from other sectors in providing training opportunities for researchers and decision makers.

In the environment and health sectors, intermediary organisations and professionals play an important role in summarising, translating and curating evidence, supporting the production of policy-relevant research, and holding relationships across research and policy. While our mapping was limited in scope, we found very few examples of initiatives that aimed to foster these skillsets and cross-sector relationships in education (for example, the African Evidence Leadership Award, Table 6.3). Often, intermediaries can help identify who needs to be at the table to support the production and use of research.

## *3. What is the best way to support research use in (specific) education systems and contexts?*

Education systems are highly complex and varied, involving multiple stakeholders and competing priorities at local, national, regional and global levels. Increasingly, those working on evidence use across sectors need to attend to the specifics of concrete decision-making contexts rather than adopting a linear model, which simplifies policy and evidence-use processes or takes a top-down, “one size fits all” approach. If a systems approach means attending to “contextual factors”, then efforts to strengthen evidence use must be context-sensitive too. Examples such as the European Union Scientific Knowledge for Environmental Protection programme (Table 6.3) can inform education systems of evidence-use interventions. This can build strategic oversight and strengthened infrastructure while providing appropriate support for individuals, institutions and systems. Connecting with ongoing evidence-use initiatives and opportunities, and designing new complementary interventions to strengthen local systems may also be wise to focus on. Recent work using a systems framework to look at evidence-informed policy and practice in education has helped to build a richer understanding of research use in context (MacGregor, Malin and Farley-Ripple, 2022<sup>[38]</sup>).

#### 4. What is the relationship between how evidence is produced and how it is used in education?

The evidence research community is paying increasing attention to how knowledge production impacts the uses of research evidence in policy and practice. This includes attending to who produces evidence, whose agenda evidence serves, and the values that underpin evidence and evidence-informed decision making. Education provides some strong examples of opening up knowledge production processes but these are unequally distributed in terms of geography and topic area, and have been used largely for practice improvements. As education, along with other sectors, aims to take a more strategic approach, stakeholders might benefit from considering other strategic agendas – such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG) 4 – that evidence for policy and practice might serve, and how. Finally, there is interesting work in Australia that looks at the quality of research use in education. It looks beyond dissemination to understand how teachers use research in their practice. On this note, it is worth referring to work by Rickinson et al. (2021<sup>[39]</sup>), which features in Chapter 9 of this publication.

#### 5. Are we investing in initiatives that work?

Across different sectors, we have much to learn about how to best improve evidence use, and how to measure success. Establishing the impact of research on policy and practice is challenging, and in general, evaluation has not been a priority for those with limited funds to support evidence use. This is now changing as the need to find solutions that can effectively support policy and practice becomes pressing. Important pockets of learning do exist across our different sectors and contexts as in, for example, the CLAHRC evaluations (Box 6.3). We hope that by investing in learning, and sharing our insights across disciplines and policy domains, we can take a faster route to more effective strategies.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> What Works Now is an internationally edited book bringing together key thinkers and researchers to consider what we know about evidence-informed policy and practice in different countries and policy sector. The text includes a sector-by-sector analysis, consideration of cross-cutting themes and international commentaries. This chapter draws in particular on the final chapter of the book, which considers cross-sector lessons from the past and prospects for the future.



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