The Right Conditions: Systemic Enablers for a Culture of Research Engagement in Education

Research evidence in education serves as a compass, directing stakeholders towards informed choices that drive educational progress, enhance teaching methodologies, address inequities and support resource optimisation. Overcoming the challenges of harnessing research evidence in education by policy makers and practitioners involves fostering a culture of research engagement.

This Education Spotlight draws on an international Policy Survey conducted with Ministries of Education from 37 education systems, and other evidence from the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation publication *Who Really Cares About Using Education Research in Policy and Practice? Developing a Culture of Research Engagement* (OECD, 2023[1]) and beyond to explore the following questions:

- **Which systemic conditions, such as resources, infrastructures, and leadership, matter for the development (or transformation) of an organisational and system-level culture of research engagement? How do these conditions relate to one another?**
- **How can these conditions be developed to best support education research engagement from the system level?**

This Spotlight reflects on the elements at the system level that are crucial for establishing such a culture for policy makers and practitioners. It does so with the understanding that complex systems require thinking strategically and employing systems approaches to knowledge mobilisation, alongside the more commonly used linear models of disseminating evidence or relational ones focusing on partnerships and networks.

Defining Research Engagement

This Spotlight distinguishes research engagement from other terms such as evidence use, evidence uptake or research use. These terms usually refer to the direct and straightforward application of research evidence, while the focus on engagement aims to attribute a more active role to practitioners and policy makers who adopt strategies to systematically and effectively integrate research into their work. They

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critically reflect on the research evidence, and collectively deliberate about its meaning and integration in practice. Engagement can also involve interacting with researchers, e.g. to jointly produce research.

Research engagement does not happen in a vacuum. Figure 1 reflects that it is people (**actors**) who engage with research, often through complex social processes that are influenced by the quality of their **relationships** and interactions. Three interconnected systemic factors can enable this: having appropriate **resources**; **structures** and **processes**; and **incentives**. Finally, **leadership** should ensure these enablers at all levels (organisational, local, and system). Connections between factors may vary in different systems and contexts.

The next pages will explore the various systemic enablers, acknowledging that a systems approach starts and ends with people – the actors who engage with research through their relationships, supported by various mechanisms, and the leaders who make it all possible.

Figure 1. Conditions enabling a culture of research engagement
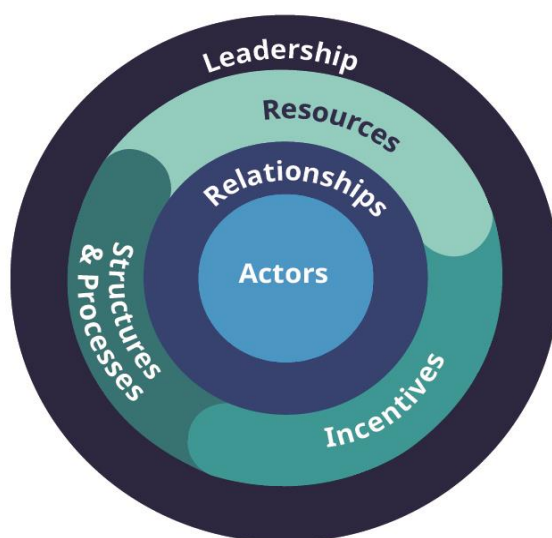
Types of Knowledge Mobilisation Activities

- ✓ Research generation and synthesis
- ✓ Research dissemination and advocacy
- ✓ Relationships and network building
- ✓ Training and capacity building
- ✓ Organisational development
- ✓ Research use and intervention support
- ✓ Evaluation and system-wide development

Source: (Torres and Steponavičius, 2022[2]), "More than just a go-between: The role of intermediaries in knowledge mobilisation", *OECD Education Working Papers,* No. 285, https://doi.org/10.1787/aa29cfd3-en.

Empowering, Enabling & Engaging? On Actors

The right skills

> *Research Literacy*: Find, access, understand and critically evaluate research.
>
> *Research Use*: Translate, apply and communicate research.
>
> *Research Production*: Formulate research needs and co-conduct it.

The essential skills for research engagement must be systematically taught and practised. While it is not necessary for every actor to have all the skills at the highest level, the Survey results show that practitioners need enhancement of all these skills; and policy makers require upskilling for research production skills.

Enabling mindsets

> *Motivation,* extrinsic and intrinsic.
>
> *Willingness* to implement changes.
>
> *Trust* and understanding with other actors.

Appropriate mindsets are required for actors to engage with research effectively. While policy makers and practitioners are generally motivated to engage with research, some ministries seem unwilling to learn new skills if these challenge preconceived notions. Further, the Survey results show low levels of trust in researchers. Systemic factors may nurture these mindsets.

Learning opportunities

The availability of learning opportunities is essential for individuals to develop the skills and knowledge required to engage with research. The quality and focus of such training are crucial.

Practitioners require more learning opportunities. Research engagement should also be integrated into teacher training and professional development. For policy makers, improved and more accessible learning opportunities are needed.

To support a culture of research engagement, explicit, specific and adequate interventions must address educational systems' learning needs. Evidence-informed frameworks can help to understand, track and tailor relevant trainings.

In a Relationship? On Quality Interactions

Stable relationships and quality interactions between stakeholders can encourage a shared understanding, promote the production of relevant research, and develop effective engagement with it. However, many systems lack these types of quality relationships between actors. Two-thirds of the surveyed systems do not think that policy makers' relationships with researchers are characterised by high levels of trust and mutual understanding.

✓ Practitioners need research partners who listen to them, are willing to include them in the research cycle, and can communicate effectively in everyday language.

✓ Relationship-building among different actors and between systems must be a core component of building a culture of research engagement at the system level.

✓ Good relationships require regularly identifying key actors and strategically investing in their quality interactions.

✓ Systemic mechanisms for collaboration are crucial and should allow the time and space to develop trusting relationships.

Is Cash Really King? On Resources

A culture of research engagement depends on sufficient resources of various types. However, the Survey responses show that these systemic factors are overall lacking.

Figure 2. Resources for using research in policy and practice

Percentage of systems agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements related to resources for using research, 2021.
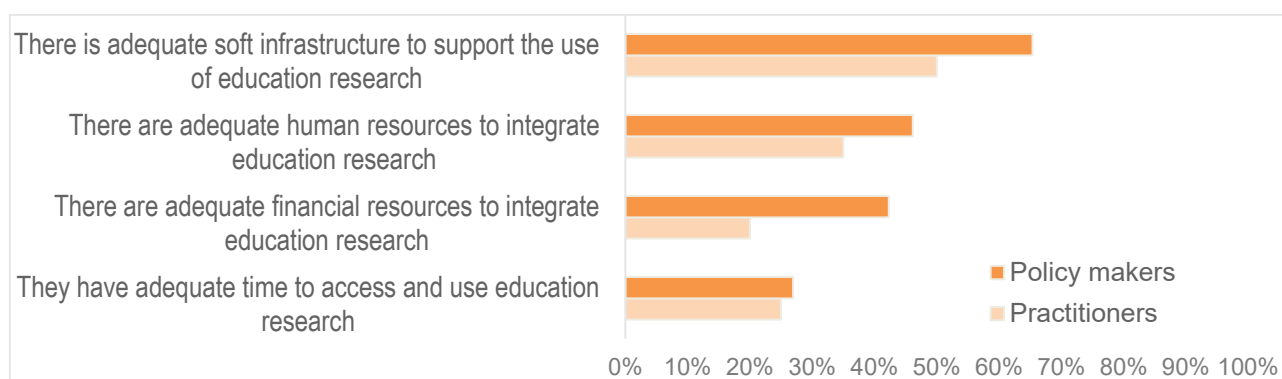
Note: Data show the percentage of respondent systems agreeing or strongly agreeing with the given statement, for either policy makers or practitioners in their education system. Data collected at a national and sub-national level. N = 26 for policy makers, 20 for practitioners. *Statements are ranked in descending order of the percentage of systems agreeing or strongly agreeing with them for policy makers.* Source: (OECD, 2023, p. 70[1]) *Who Really Cares about Using Education Research in Policy and Practice?: Developing a Culture of Research Engagement*, Educational Research and Innovation, https://doi.org/10.1787/bc641427-en.

Funding

Stable funding is needed for producing relevant research and syntheses. While most systems have mechanisms for funding research, 58% of them reported insufficient financial resources for policy makers to integrate education research, and 80% reported so for practitioners.

Funding schemes should align criteria, timeframes and deliverables to adjust to the needs of high-quality research-policy-practice engagement.

Time

The lack of time to access and use research is a shared challenge for policy makers and practitioners. 73% of systems reported a lack of time as a barrier to research engagement.

Systematic mechanisms are needed to ensure explicit time allocation for research engagement, alongside other supports.

Human Resources

Adequate human resources are essential: good leadership (see below), and collective and individual capacity development for research use.

Competences should be identified, e.g. in the competence framework by the JRC. They should then be integrated into human resources policies, including recruitment, professional development and learning opportunities, evaluation, and mobility schemes, such as secondments (e.g. in Ireland, Wales) or public sector PhD programmes (e.g. in Norway).

Infrastructure

Effective research engagement requires certain infrastructure: facilities, governance and administrative infrastructure, e.g. clarity of contractual arrangements; roles of different stakeholders; data ownership and security.

Soft infrastructure includes networks, databases, journal subscriptions, and collaborative forums. The availability of these was found to correlate with practitioners' levels of research literacy. Overall, soft infrastructure is more available than other resources, but this does not reduce the time burden for all, possibly due to a lack of other resources.

How does it all work together?

✓ A marked difference was found in terms of culture and skills between systems with mechanisms offering resources to support practitioners' research use and those without.

✓ Human, financial and strategic resources are interrelated and should work together to tackle barriers. Financial resources on their own are not enough - resources need to be tied together by a structured approach. Resources are also intertwined with other enabling factors – incentives, structures and processes.

Carrots and Sticks? On Incentives

Incentives and rewards influence attitudes and behaviours towards research use. It is essential to enhance teachers' and policy makers' incentives to learn to engage with research thoughtfully, and researchers' incentives to engage with these actors.

Figure 3. Involvement in research production and related incentives
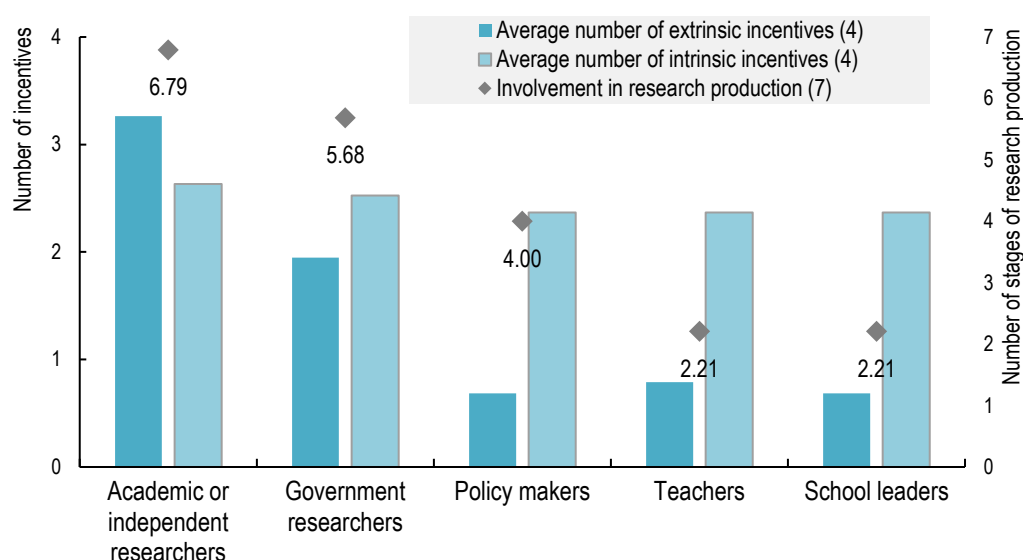
Note: Data show the average number stages of research production ("In formulating the research questions", "designing the research", "co-ordinating the research", "collecting the data", "analysing and interpreting the data", "communicating research results", and "evaluating the

research results") in which systems perceive a given stakeholder to be involved in, and the average number of extrinsic ("is part of their job description", "is part of their performance evaluation criteria (e.g. for promotion, tenure)", "implies time allocation (e.g. a certain number of hours per week)", and "implies a salary supplement") and intrinsic incentives ("gives them a sense of participation in national debate", "allows them to improve practices and processes", "implies informal recognition (e.g. from their peers, hierarchy)", and "allows them to support decision making") that systems perceive a given stakeholder has to be involved in research production. Data collected at a national and sub-national level. N = 19.

Stakeholders are ranked in descending order of the average number of research production stages in which they are reportedly involved.
Source: (OECD, 2023, p. 46[1]) *Who Really Cares about Using Education Research in Policy and Practice?: Developing a Culture of Research Engagement*, Educational Research and Innovation, https://doi.org/10.1787/bc641427-en.

Researchers

Incentives should encourage researchers to develop their understanding of the nature, questions, problems and context of policy making, schools and teaching practice. However, academic incentives tend to reward faculty for their influence on other academics, mostly through publishing, leaving them little time to engage with policy makers or practitioners.

System-level incentives are needed to support researchers' attitudes and engagement, possibly by rewarding impact-related activities or encouraging secondment schemes. Another way is for funders to use their grant making to incentivise changes so that academia rewards faculty that produce socially impactful research and equips academics with the requisite skills.

Policy makers & practitioners

Teachers, school leaders and policy makers often do not have formal incentives to engage with research production, such as allocated time, salary supplement and formal recognition. Ministries reported more "intrinsic" motivators than "extrinsic" incentives for research production. As reflected in the figure below, systems reporting a greater number of incentives for practitioners to be involved in research production generally also reported that practitioners were in fact more active in producing research.

Better incentives can also promote research engagement and other knowledge mobilisation activities. Some promising initiatives include research co-production built into teachers' career development; public sector PhD schemes; and various researcher roles in government.

Solid Foundations? On Structures & Processes

A systems approach to education research engagement in policy and practice requires stable mechanisms - processes and structures that support and enhance a culture of research use, at the system and organisational level. These would facilitate the generation of relevant research, interactions between actors, and their engagement with research.

Figure 4. Presence of mechanisms facilitating the use of educational research, 2021

Percentage of systems reporting the existence of a given mechanism, by approach and context.
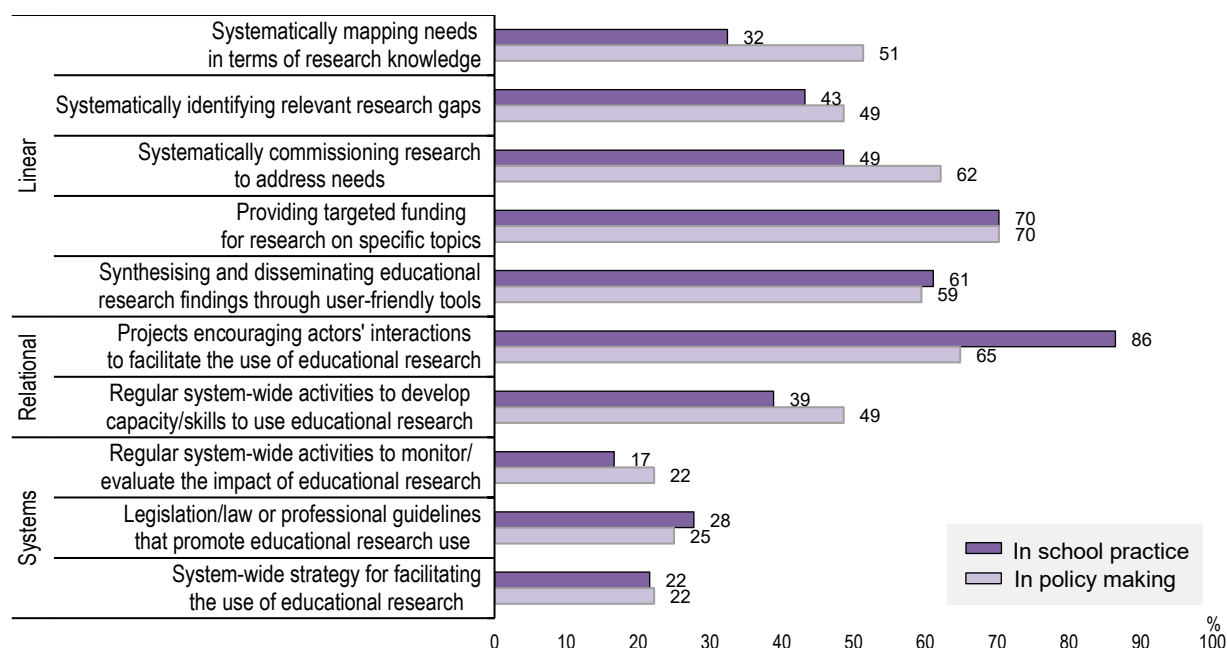
Note: Data was collected at national and sub-national levels.

Source: (OECD, 2022, p. 108[3]) *Who Cares about Using Education Research in Policy and Practice?: Strengthening Research Engagement*, Educational Research and Innovation, https://doi.org/10.1787/d7ff793d-en.

On average, systems reported having 4-5 mechanisms out of a dozen they were asked about. Only 22% of systems have a system-wide strategy for research use – those with strategies reported having more mechanisms than those without. Overall, the landscape is dominated by linear and relational mechanisms – systems approaches are scarcer.

Despite some systems having a reasonable number of mechanisms, others lack basic ones. Systems also widely reported the lack of mechanisms that facilitate research use as one of their most critical barriers.

Notably, commissioned research is more frequently reported than the systematic identification of needs, raising concerns about the alignment of commissioned research with genuine needs. Additionally, about a third of systems indicate that they synthesise and disseminate research in user-friendly formats while simultaneously reporting the low accessibility of research as a barrier. Such findings suggest that existing mechanisms may be ineffective, inadequate, or lack co-ordination.

> To make using research *the* work, not *more* work, existing processes and structures should be leveraged.

How to tap into structures and processes?

✓ Strategies formalising and embedding research-use within existing structures and processes have been reported to have positive effects. To make using research *the* work, not *more* work, existing processes and structures should be leveraged. For example, routine learning processes for improving teacher knowledge and skills can be embedded with expectations of and support for research use.

✓ As long-term factors, structures and processes supporting research use should be resistant to organisational, staff or leadership changes and political shifts. They need to be stable, but also flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances.

✓ System-wide strategies are crucial to ensure that sufficient mechanisms are in place and enhance their effectiveness and the co-ordination between them.

Steering the System? On Leadership

Effective leadership is crucial in enabling the other systemic enablers – resources, structures and processes, incentives and relationships - and tying them together. Leaders are actors who can drive a culture of research engagement within and across organisations, and at the system level, when they employ the following actions and attitudes (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Leadership actions and attitudes

Individual	Organisational			Systemic
Engage with research to inform their own practices	Shape organisational supports for research use			Develop system leadership and networked leadership
Act as knowledge brokers / Serve as a model for others	Interpret research and adapt it to local context	Drive innovation and experimen-tation which engages with research	Set expectations for research use / Actively encourage collaboration and sharing	Allocate resources to evidence use: time, financial, human resources	Foster trust, collective responsibility and shared mindsets for evidence use / Navigate a complex environment and take strategic decisions on research use

System leaders build relationships across and beyond schools and organisations with the overall goal of sustained improvement of organisations through system-level improvement. They often work to mobilise knowledge within, between and across partners.

Networked leadership is the leadership of relationships and interactions, based on partnership and collaboration, spanning several organisations and sometimes also communities.

Our analysis suggests that networked leadership approaches are more suited to build and strengthen trust and create a shared cultural mindset, both of which are conditions for the systematic and inclusive use of research in education policy.

There is scope for further research on what is distinct in networked leadership from system leadership, and how each concept can support our understanding of the role of leadership in improving research generation and engagement.

The way forward for research-engaged leadership

✓ Develop leaders to become role models of evidence-use, trained to facilitate professional learning and engagement with research, embedding an ethos that encourages regular self-reflection, taking risks and trying different approaches based on evidence.

✓ Develop strategic leadership within and across organisations which takes concrete actions to redefine organisational culture in favour of research engagement.

✓ Coherent and effective system leadership at the national level is critical to ensuring the conditions for thoughtful engagement with research in policy and practice. School leaders can be more effective in building a culture of research engagement in their schools when the appropriate conditions are ensured by local and national level leadership.

✓ Strong connections between different levels and types of system leadership, are critical. Linking organisational and system-level cultures requires sound leadership across the different levels with a shared vision and a focus on research engagement.

The bottom line: Systemic Enablers and Networked Leadership for Research Engagement

A systems approach requires strong connections between leadership at different levels, to model research engagement and ensure systemic enablers are in place. These include adequate resources: time, money, human resources, and soft and hard infrastructure – to access research, produce it, and develop the skills and attitudes to engage with it. Leaders should also ensure relevant incentives are in place for researchers, practitioners and policy makers to interact effectively. Existing structures and processes should be embedded with research use, and new ones be developed to advance systematic research engagement at all levels. Finally, leaders should hold a shared vision and set expectations for research use throughout the system.

While the systemic enablers for a culture of research engagement manifest themselves differently in different contexts, it is critical to ensure their development at an adequate level, to create the conditions for research-engaged schools and policy organisations.

Systemic Enablers for Research Engagement

A culture of research engagement means practitioners and policy makers actively adopt strategies to integrate research into their work, systematically and effectively. Effective knowledge mobilisation involves actors' quality interactions with one another to collectively produce, interpret and use evidence well. To develop and sustain such a culture, system-level support is essential.

This Education Spotlight debates the elements at the system level that are necessary for establishing a culture of research engagement among education policy makers and practitioners. These include appropriate incentives, resources, structures and processes, and effective leadership. It draws on evidence, including an international Policy Survey conducted with Ministries of Education from 37 education systems, from the OECD's publication *Who Really Cares About Using Education Research in Policy and Practice?: Developing a Culture of Research Engagement*.

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This document was prepared by Tali Malkin and the *Strengthening the Impact of Education Research* team at the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills, based on the publications listed below.

The OECD *Strengthening the Impact of Education Research* project supports countries in understanding how to use education research in policy and practice, systematically and at scale.

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See: https://www.oecd.org/education/ceri/education-research.htm

OECD (2022), *Who Cares about Using Education Research in Policy and Practice?: Strengthening Research Engagement,* Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/d7ff793d-en.

OECD (2023), *Who Really Cares About Using Education Research in Policy and Practice?: Developing a Culture of Research Engagement*, Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/bc641427-en.

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