

# Linking research, policy and practice in education and training

A staff development seminar in cooperation with the NESSE network of experts

On 8 June 2007, the Madou Auditorium played host to the first of a new series of Commission staff development seminars on social aspects of education and training. The seminars are organized by the Directorate-General for Education and Culture and delivered by members of the [NESSE network of experts](#). This first seminar was on the links between research, policy and practice in the field of education. Eminent experts presented their views on the relationship between research in education and how the results of that research are used by policy-makers and practitioners in this field. The presentations left little doubt that the European Commission has a crucial role to play in strengthening the role for research and evidence in policy making.

The seminar was the first of a series of special information and discussion sessions whose purpose is to enhance the perspectives of staff on social aspects of education and training by drawing on state-of-the-art knowledge and expertise from world-renowned scholars.

[Professor Ben Levin](#), from the University of Toronto in Canada and former Deputy Minister of Education, was joined by [Professor Susan Robertson](#) from the University of Bristol, to stimulate a lively debate on how to improve the links between the worlds of education research, policy, and practice.

Drawing on his experience as a senior policy maker



as well as a researcher, **Professor Levin** discussed the growing interest in evidence to inform education policy. He outlined some of the progress in this area and also some of the obstacles to a stronger role for research and evidence, concluding with some suggestions on the role that could

be played by international agencies such as the European Commission.

Professor Levin argued that the widely-held assumption that research results feed directly into

policy formulation in a linear manner is wrong. He demonstrated with examples that in reality, there is a complex set of relationships between the **producers** of research outputs, the **mediators** of research outputs (such as lobbyists or the media) and the **users** of research (politicians, education practitioners). These relationships are further influenced by the social context and the general climate of ideas at a particular moment in time, and the inter-linkages between the various actors vary in strength and intensity over time too.

Professor Levin argued that increased effort is necessary to improve the links between the large body of research knowledge and government education policy. He suggested that the Commission, with its many structured networks and working groups, is very well-placed to help remove the barriers that exist between the research and policy-making worlds.

This conclusion is all the more important in the light of his view that **more money would not solve the problem**, a view that would seem counter-intuitive to those who claim increased education funding is crucial to any education reform process. For Professor Levin, the point is that it is the **processes**, **networks** and **frameworks** of cooperation and collaboration between researchers and policy-

makers that determine the extent to which research results are adopted by policy-makers, and subsequently incorporated into policy. Merely throwing money at the problem will not in itself change these processes.

Rather, Professor Levin sees **better communication** as an essential part of any process to improve the links between research, policy and practice.



During the second part of the seminar, **Professor Robertson** looked at examples of innovative practices where there are linkages made between how knowledge is created, managed and disseminated and how it is taken up in education policy and practice.

She turned to the importance of knowledge for the development of knowledge-based economies and a 'knowledge society'. There is no doubt that knowledge is important; indeed, the concept is very old. It goes back at least as far as the turn of the twentieth century and the beginning of production line mass-production, where knowledge was seen as the 'alchemy' of the industrial age.

Knowledge is also vital for a cohesive and effective society and economy. A modern, effective society is a socially inclusive society, and education is a vital part of the process of nurturing social inclusion. However, in Europe (and elsewhere), there has been a tendency for the disseminators, or "brokers", of knowledge to be rather passive. For Professor Robertson, the question for Europe is how to move from "passive" knowledge dissemination towards more "active" brokerage of knowledge. Professor Robertson argues that whatever way they choose to do this, policy-makers must acknowledge that the diversity of our societies by necessity will involve a diverse set of objectives, some of which might even be contradictory. The central element for success here, for Professor Robertson, remains the need for effective, **two-way communication** to ensure that knowledge is not only **produced** and **mediated**, but that it is also **applied** with due attention to the **context** in which the process takes place.

For Professor Robertson, therefore, it is crucial to have a "**theory of implementation**" for the impact of knowledge and research evidence on policy-making and educational practice. She used the example of a

country that decides to spend a large sum of money on installing ICT equipment in the classroom, in the expectation that the equipment will itself revolutionize learning in the classroom. Experience has shown that this does not happen. The mistaken expectation in this example is the result of invalid assumptions about the implementation in education policy of research results on the use of ICT in the classroom. In other words, the country in the example should have paid more attention to formulating a more appropriate theory of implementation, which correctly takes the context into account. In sum, an appropriate theory of implementation would be able to answer the questions "what will work for whom, under what circumstances, with what effects and under what conditions?"

For further information on the speakers see:

<http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~blevin/>

<http://www.bris.ac.uk/education/people/academicStaff/edslr>

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#### Other NESSE seminars:

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*[Education and Migration](#)*

*[Achieving equality in practice: challenges for policy-makers](#)*

*[New Governance Models for Education and Training and their Implications](#)*

*[Priority Education Policies to Combat Inequalities and School Failure](#)*

*[Education and the Integration of Migrant Children: lessons from research for policy and practice](#)*

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*[Education and Children's Well-Being: the role of Sports, Culture, Health and Citizenship](#)*

*[Which Citizen for which Europe? Balancing the economic and socio-cultural aims of education and training](#)*