

Towards a National Strategy for Research Impact on Education Policy and Practice in UAE

The purpose of this brief piece is to outline the requirements for developing a national strategy for coordinating and optimising research impact on education policy and practice in UAE. Questions of the kinds of research, structures, coordination and funding are briefly addressed in the sections that follow as an invitation (or provocation) to further thought, reflection, discussion and action planning among members of the research, policy and practice communities in UAE and their partners. Some readers may view themselves as members of more than one of these communities!



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What kinds of research optimise impact on education policy and practice?

Policy-makers and practitioners understandably ask, what impact does educational research have on the quality of learning, teaching and leadership in schools in UAE, and thereby on education policy and practice. This is a legitimate question that challenges researchers all over the world to ensure their research is at least relevant to education practice and policy development. It can rightly be expected by policy-makers and practitioners that a College of Education such as ECAE has persuasive and realistic answers to this question. A fruitful entry point into this question is to consider what kinds of educational research are useful and realistic for generating appropriate kinds of evidence as the basis for making warranted recommendations for policy and practice innovation and improvement. One general response is reviews of research, and reviews of research reviews. In contrast to single research projects and multiple separately reported projects, carefully conducted reviews of research, and reviews of reviews of research, with a focus on a particular educational policy or practice field, domain or priority, synthesise weightier bodies of accumulated research evidence developed by many programmes of research undertaken over time and across a wider range of contexts.

Three implications stem from this argument and they are worth considering by researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. One, practitioners and policy-makers should not overestimate the significance of the conclusions of any individual research study, especially a study whose findings support preferred policy and/or practice choices. Two, researchers should not claim too much significance for the findings from their individual research project for policy and practice change. Three, rigorous reviews, and reviews of reviews, of *all research* meeting specified quality criteria in a given policy or practice field, provide a more valid, justifiable basis for making more confident recommendations for policy and practice innovation and improvement. The heavier weight and wider range of evidence developed, analysed and reported across time and context by research reviews and syntheses forms a more trustworthy and valid basis for *confidence in* policy and practice recommendations than findings from individual empirical research studies.

What is needed for the development of a warranted, contextually relevant and rigorous research evidence base for informing recommendations for policy and practice innovation and improvement in the UAE?

There are seven broad ideas, adapted from a well-established literature that I would like to sketch here with a focus on the UAE context.

1. The intentional replication of well-theorised, empirical practice and policy-oriented studies across different school and classroom contexts in the UAE. This would include the replication of landmark or authoritative studies from overseas in UAE contexts so that research claims developed in different non-UAE contexts can be critically examined, researched and put to test in multiple other UAE contexts. This way the research community builds an increasingly strong and growing body of home-grown empirical research evidence for informing policy and practice innovation and improvement. Such home-grown research studies themselves can be subsequently replicated in other UAE contexts further adding to the UAE educational research evidence base for policy and practice improvement.

2. Staying with the replication idea, the “free-gifting” of appropriate data collection and/or analysis instruments and procedures from one research study, context and team to others. For example, we can find out if (a) findings developed from particular instruments in non-UAE contexts replicate to contexts in the UAE, and (b) whether there are faults in the original instrumentation and/or analytic processes which can be subsequently modified in ways that lead to the generation of higher quality data, especially data informing knowledge creation well-contextualised for contexts of policy and practice development in the UAE.

3. A more concerted and systematic effort and commitment towards conducting research reviews and reviews of reviews addressing policy and practice priorities articulated by practitioners and policy makers in the UAE for reasons developed above (see the third paragraph of this piece).

4. Large scale systematic research focused on carefully measured students’ learning and learning-related outcomes and attainments can support extremely helpful comparisons of such outcomes across nations, contexts and over time. It may not be claimed, however, that such research *on its own* can inform directly *how* outcomes can be improved in different contexts and *how* certain pedagogic and leadership practices might be adapted for use in different contexts to support targeted improvements in student outcomes.

5. Therefore, there needs to be a coordinated, systematic program of well-theorised empirical studies (ideally utilising mixed methods research designs and strategies) undertaken to explore, examine and test the effectiveness of particular pedagogic, curriculum, assessment, leadership, and organisational strategies and interventions for optimising specified student outcomes in the full range of school and classroom contexts in UAE. These studies need to include in their aims, plans and designs, well-adapted processes and procedures for exploring and testing theorised linkages between the focal strategies and interventions and particular patterns of student outcomes identified through the learning outcomes comparison studies noted in point 4 above.

6. *All* empirical projects *and* research reviews, for the purposes of informing improvements in education policy and practice, need to have clear research impact leadership and structures. At minimum, a Steering Committee or Group needs to be built into research planning and organisation. Steering Groups need to comprise key education *impact agents* – education policy-makers, educational leaders, practitioners and other relevant educators with experience and expertise in the focal area(s) of investigation. The Research Impact Steering Group should meet periodically throughout the lifetime of a research project or review process to advise and provide formative, critical feedback to the research team on how the research (sampling, data collection, analysis and reporting – including reporting *channels*) can develop or be modified in ways that will optimise research impact on identified aspects of education policy and practice. This way research impact is planned for from the beginning of a project or review as an intrinsic, specified feature of research process, design and funding considerations, informing *all* parts of the research process *from inception to completion*. It remains too often the case that impact is introduced (if at all) as a separate and late addition to the research process once data analytic processes have been completed.

7. There is not the space in this piece to go into the power of impactful localised research promoted successfully in schools and networks of schools by teachers and leaders committed to Practitioner Research, Action Research and Lesson Study as dynamics of practice and policy change *in situ*. Such localised impact broadens through dissemination in supportive contexts of school-university partnerships and school-to-school networks. But on their own, such localised impact strategies can not meet *all* the needs of a comprehensive coordinated *national* educational research impact strategy. These grounded strategies do though play a significant role.

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Points 1-7 above suggest the kinds of research approach which can be deliberately planned for and coordinated to shape a national research impact strategy. These research approaches reflect the kinds of research planning and designs that can be effectively applied for implementation in different school and classroom contexts throughout the UAE. Such research approaches (points 1-7 above) are well adapted for developing high quality, policy- and practice-relevant evidence, well contextualised to UAE scenarios. Such rigorous and relevant evidence is home-grown as well as high quality and therefore necessary for informing sustained research impact on education policy and practice innovation and improvement in the UAE *on a national scale*.

In addition to the kinds of research outlined so far, there needs to be accompanying enabling structures, coordination, and funding provision at the *national level*. What is proposed here in the most general terms is a dedicated UAE National Centre for Educational Research, Policy and Practice Impact focused on the development of systematic research reviews, reviews of reviews, and the coordination of well-theorised empirical research and study replications ensuring that policy and practice priorities of the UAE are supported by rigorous research evidence developed in all relevant contexts *nationwide*. The core purpose of the Centre would be to build bodies of home-grown validated research evidence, based on the kinds of research designs and practices sketched in points 1-7 above, generating a wide range of qualitative and quantitative evidence from *across the nation*, to be interpreted and re-interpreted by research teams working closely with practitioners and policy-makers, to inform policy and practice recommendations and interventions for ongoing policy and practice innovation and improvement for the UAE.