

# The Landscape of Educational Research in the UK

May 2024

# Summary

As part of a multi-year programme of work looking at educational research in the UK, the British Academy and the Royal Society commissioned a study to identify, quantify and map the production of educational research within the UK in the period from 2010 to 2020, focusing on both compulsory and post-18 education. A team at the University of Oxford produced a report which mapped key research outputs, funding patterns, main topics, approaches, and dissemination across this ten-year period.<sup>1</sup> This document presents a summary of that report's central findings.

The scope of the report extends across the full educational research landscape, including at doctoral level, and includes reference to funded work beyond the research councils, as far as such information was available and accessible. A bibliometric analysis of publications and doctoral theses, in addition to text mining, affords an overview of the main topics of focus for educational research in this period, as well as identifying gaps. Semi-structured interviews and stakeholder workshops also provided qualitative evidence on the views of those undertaking educational research and involved in the wider ecosystem. The report's description of the sector is detailed and systematic, giving a strong sense of the scale of this research domain and of its complexity. This document provides a short summary of the main findings of *The Landscape of Educational Research in the UK*. The reader is encouraged to read the full report for a more detailed explanation of its findings and analysis.

Total funding for all educational research grants in the period 2010 to 2020 amounted to £406m (including co-funding). Just over half of the total number of grants over this period came from three funding bodies, as outlined in Table 1. The total number of grants included those with UK and non-UK principal investigators (PI).

**Table 1: Top funders for research grants for educational research (UK and non-UK PI), by number of grants.**

No.	Funding body	Number of grants	Percentage (n=995)
1	Economic and Social Research Council	273	27%
2	Nuffield Foundation	152	15%
3	Education Endowment Foundation	99	10%

The picture is slightly different for the top three funders of overall research grants by total funding amount as shown in Table 2, but again the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) both feature in the top three funders.

<sup>1</sup> Oancea, A., McDermott, T., Robson, J., Scutt, C., Xu, X., Mun, O., Nuseibeh, N. and Voss, M. (2021), *The Landscape of Educational Research in the UK (Compulsory and Post-compulsory)*. Report to the British Academy and Royal Society.

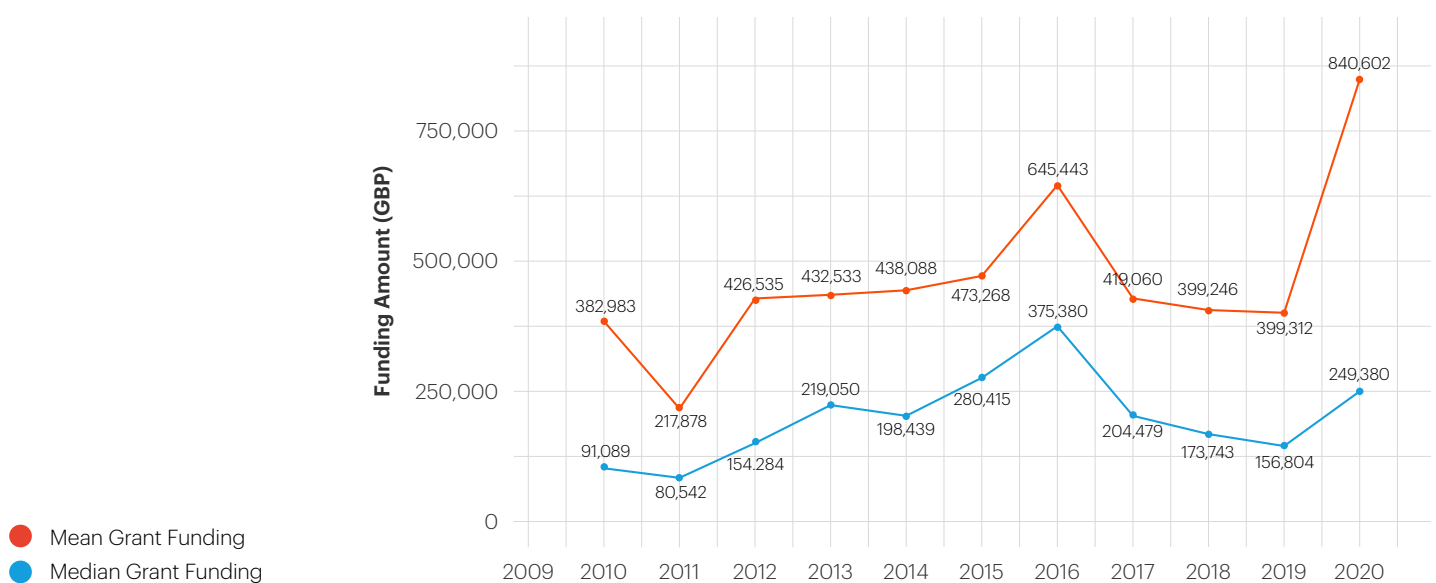
**Table 2: Top funders for research grants (UK and non-UK PI), by total funding amount**

No.	Funding body	Total funding size (£)	Percentage (n=£406,601,979.4)
1	Economic and Social Research Council	124,455,034	31%
2	European Commission	70,643,057	17%
3	Education Endowment Foundation	54,886,724	16%

**Table 3: Top funders for research grants (UK PI only, by total funding amount)**

No.	Funding body	Total funding size (£)	Percentage (n=£406,601,979.4)
1	Economic and Social Research Council	122,331,913	39%
2	Education Endowment Foundation	54,326,834	17%
3	Arts and Humanities Research Council	22,445,588	7%

When looking at the trajectory of funding over the period between 2010 and 2020, the research team found that, despite fluctuations, total research project funding for educational research increased, as seen in Figure 1 below. The apparent dramatic increase in funding for 2020 is attributed to an Australian Research Council centre grant totalling over £18 million, and the report suggested that the median grant funding may be a better reflection of typical funding awarded to educational research projects during this period. The greatest proportion of grants awarded across this period were of short and medium duration, with two-thirds being less than three years in duration.

**Figure 1: Total and mean amount of funding for educational research grants awarded to research projects which involved a principal investigator, co-principal investigator, or co-investigator with a UK institutional affiliation, 2010-2020.**

In terms of the distribution of this funding, of the top thirteen institutions receiving more than 10 (principal investigator) research grants in the period 2010-2020, all but one were Russell Group institutions and, save for the University of Edinburgh, all were based in England. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), coming in at 12th on this list, was the only non-higher education institution in this top group. If we look further down the list, however, non-higher education institutions are also represented by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), both acting independently and also conducting research in tandem with higher education institutions.

Almost 20,000 articles and well over 1000 books were published across this ten-year period, and these appeared predominantly in the top 100 journals (by number of outputs). A graph showing the total number of published research outputs by primary topic can be found in the Annex below. In modelling the topics of research through the corpus of publications across this period, the Oxford research team found that the topics most frequently focused on were:

- Education policy (556 research outputs, 3% of the total)
- Learning outcomes (543 research outputs, 2% of the total)
- Initial Teacher Education (518 research outputs, 2% of the total)

The fact that these three topics represent such small percentages of the total review corpus for this report, yet were the most frequently focused on, speaks to the breadth of topics which have formed the focus of educational research.

As noted in the report, this differed from doctoral theses produced across the same period, where the most common topics of research focus were technology and education, language education, and philosophical and conceptual issues. Research into STEM education and into school-based intervention, however, were found to be the topics associated with the greatest amount of funding. In terms of evidence generation for educational research, the most commonly referenced methodological terms across all outputs and grants awarded were 'interventions and evaluations', 'interviews' and 'case studies and surveys'.

The report also identified some areas of research which were underrepresented in the educational research ecosystem. These included artificial intelligence and education technology; curriculum design, introduction, and evaluation; and young people's voices. It was also noted that 'several participants had suggested there was an insufficient amount of longitudinal research', which may perhaps be associated with the relatively short duration of the majority of grants awarded, as noted above.

In relation to other trends in the research landscape, the report also makes observations with respect to impact and influence. Although publications remain important, routes for knowledge exchange and the route from educational research to policy influence are supported and developed by a diverse range of mediums. Formal advisory roles, whether through participation in advisory committees or giving evidence as part of a governmental review, were also identified as an important route for educational research to have policy influence and the report demonstrates the local, regional, and national focus of this influence.

Higher education-based research staff could, however, suffer from the predominance of short-term funding for projects in educational research as well as equally uncertain contractual arrangements.

The report concludes by highlighting themes arising from the literature review, which suggest some possible future priorities for educational research in the UK. Common opportunities for the future of the discipline emerged, the first of which was adopting a principled view on what matters in educational research. Where this was expressed more strongly in the literature, principles included sustaining and enhancing the quality of educational research; collaboration among disciplines, stakeholder groups, researchers, and across geographical regions (particularly across the UK); and sustaining the independence of research, with funding bodies keeping restrictions on research, including commissioned research, to a minimum. The importance of learning from past models and experience represented a second theme, with a number of papers highlighting the importance of policymaking and funding strategies taking these learnings into consideration alongside current pressures on the system.

In setting a future agenda for educational research, the report emphasises the importance of striking a balance between user-defined priority and a more open research agenda for advancing scholarly knowledge, resulting in a mix of strategic and policy/practice-orientated research and what the report terms more 'blue skies' conceptual, exploratory, high-risk and critical research. There are also balances to be drawn between the international and the local in terms of both priorities and traditions of educational thought. Collaboration across different disciplinary fields of education was also identified in the literature as a priority, alongside a better understanding of the different intellectual traditions and contexts which make up the field of educational research in the UK and internationally.

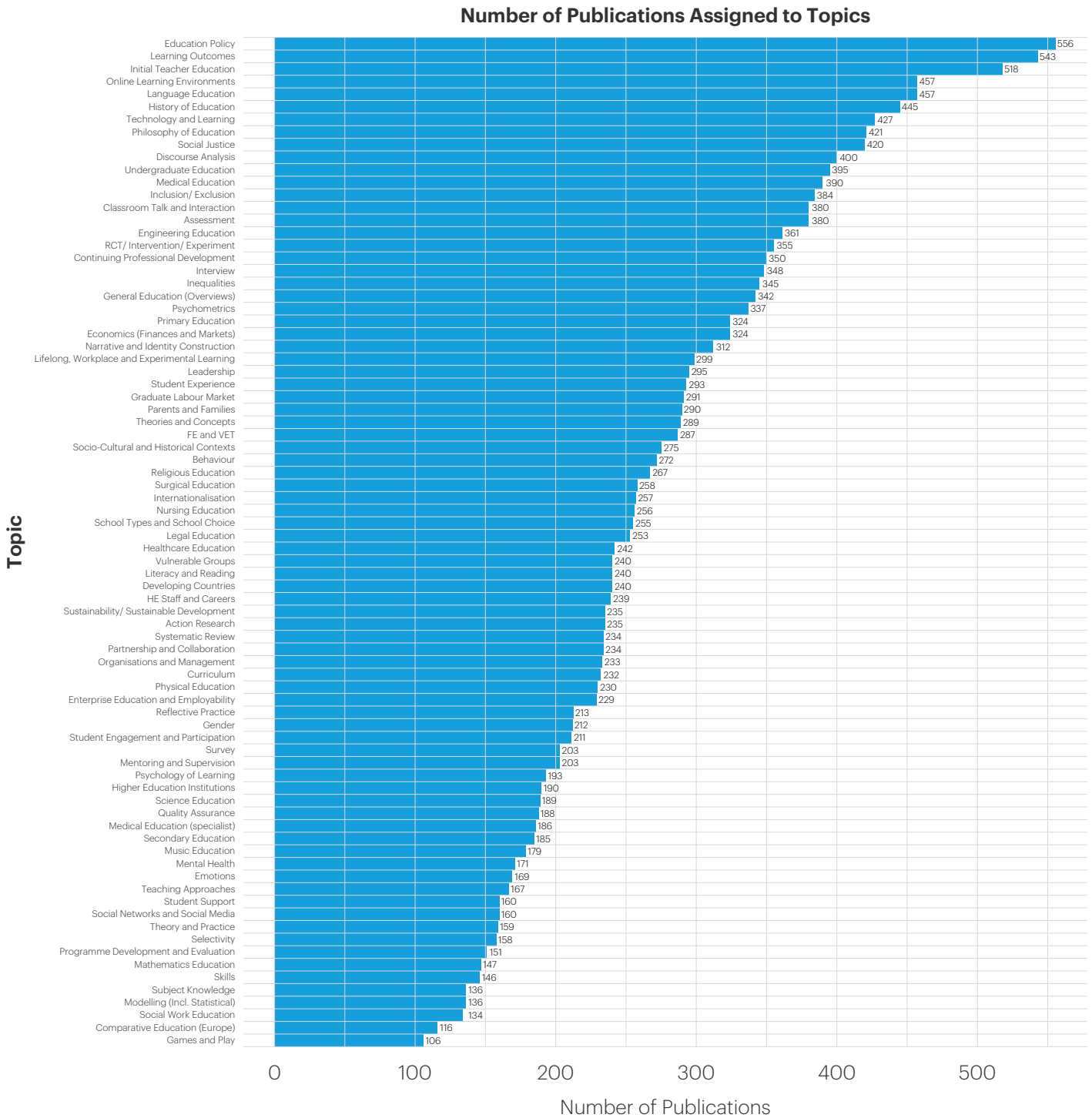
A further theme identified from the literature, and particularly informed by qualitative data, is of the ongoing need to improve the visibility and raise the profile of educational research. The suggestion made is, broadly, that funding bodies and professional societies engage in dialogue about the need for high-quality and diverse research on education, as well as collaboration and constructive criticism.

Finally, the development and sustainability of educational research is noted as a recurring theme in the literature. Publications emphasise the diversity of the educational workforce and the sectors they come from (including education at all levels, but also government agencies, commercial organisations and consultancies, as well as charities, NGOs and international organisations). Against this, however, they highlight the uneven distribution of the infrastructure, knowledge and skills, and organisational conditions for high-quality and usable research across sectors and regions of the UK, as well as the underrepresentation of women, those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and those with practitioner backgrounds, in definitions of 'research active staff' and leadership structures. The need for continued and further development of a range of research skills, as well as transferable skills for interpreting, communicating, and critically evaluating research is also highlighted.

The report ends by noting the value of encouraging collaborative research cultures and practices across educational research, rather than an emphasis on competitiveness inside and between institutions. Funding arrangements are seen by the literature as essential for sustaining a critical base for research in education, and that fluctuations in funding resulting in reduced capacity across different segments of the field of educational research are likely to have serious long-term consequences.

# Annex

**Figure 2: Number of published research output documents allocated to each topic (i.e. number of documents primarily addressing a given topic), 2010 - 2020**



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