Knowledge mobilisation in education in South Africa

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Education system overview

The legacy of apartheid education presented enormous challenges to the government at South Africa’s transition to democracy in 1994. Eighteen racially separated departments of education for different race groups had to be integrated. A new assessment, qualification and certification structure and new accountability and support structures were required. In terms of financing wide disparities in the per capita allocation for students of different race groups had to be addressed. The curriculum was outdated, both in terms of formal knowledge, but also in terms of the racial and gender biases it contained. The infrastructure of most schools and many higher education institutions was in a dismal state and required considerable capital investment. Through a series of discussion documents, white papers, green papers, bills and laws, the massive task of transforming education was undertaken in the years following transition. Resting upon the crucial South African Schools Act of 1996 for schools, and the White Paper of 1997 for higher education, a unitary, non-racial system of education provision was created, with one national and nine provincial departments responsible for overseeing the delivery of education.

Although there have been significant gains in access to schooling, access to higher education and the quality of educational processes and outcomes in both schools and higher education institutions has remained a problem. South Africa’s performance on local and international standardised tests like TIMSS and PIRLS has been poor and the vocational and higher education sectors are struggling to graduate sufficient numbers of appropriately skilled people to meet the social and economic demands of the country. Wide disparities still exist between different provinces and between schools and universities that were previously established
for different race groups. The system is still characterised by very unequal provision for students from different racial and social class locations.

Publicly funded education in South Africa is grouped into General Education and Training (GET), Further Education and Training (FET), and Higher Education (HE). In relation to formal schooling, GET comprises Reception year to Grade 9, FET incorporates Grades 10 to 12, the final year of which culminates in a nationally set exam, the National Senior Certificate. FET also incorporates the college sector, consisting of about fifty institutions focused on vocational training. All education qualifications are framed within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of which the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) is a sub-structure. Education (all sectors) attracts the largest Government budget allocation. In the 2010 budget, Education received 10.9% of the total budget, or R165.5 billion of the total R907 billion budget. Higher education received R23.3 billion (12.4%) of the education budget, with the bulk of the rest going to schooling and further education (SA Revenue Service, 2010).

The higher education landscape

The public higher education sector consists of 23 institutions, including eleven universities, six comprehensive universities and six universities of technology. These are listed in Table 1. The private higher education sector in South Africa is miniscule, and in education, negligible. Universities offer a combination of programmes, including career-oriented degrees and professional programmes, general formative programmes and master’s and doctoral programmes. Universities of technology are focused on technical and vocational education. Comprehensive universities offer programmes across the spectrum, from research degrees to career-oriented diplomas. The public sector is marked by large institutions, with a high intake of students and a reputation for generating a substantial amount of the total research produced in the country. In contrast the private sector in made up mainly of small institutions offering programmes in niche areas (CHE, 2009).

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1 R7 in South African currency is roughly equal to 1USD.
Table 1: Number of students and academic staff at Public Higher Education Institutions (2007):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Under-graduate degree/diploma</th>
<th>Post-graduate degree/diploma</th>
<th>Masters Degree</th>
<th>Doctoral Degree</th>
<th>Academic/research staff</th>
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<tr>
<td>University of Venda (2008)</td>
<td>10124</td>
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<td>256</td>
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<td>7680</td>
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<td><strong>Traditional universities</strong></td>
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<td>2864</td>
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<td>1658</td>
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<td>1162</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>579</td>
<td>207</td>
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(Source: Compiled from [http://www.sarua.org/?q=SouthAfrica](http://www.sarua.org/?q=SouthAfrica))

The two main statutory bodies in the higher education sector are the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South Africa Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The higher education institutions are also represented by Higher Education South Africa (HESA), a loosely coordinated network. The CHE is responsible for advising the Minister of Education on higher education matters, and contributes to quality assurance in higher education through institutional audits (see detail below) and processes of accrediting the programmes offered in higher education. SAQA is a body made up of members appointed by the Ministers of Education and Labour and is responsible for the development and implementation of the National
Qualifications Framework (NQF). HESA was formed in 2005 as an NGO, and represents all public universities and universities of technology. The main roles played by HESA include policy analysis and strategic research, advocacy and stakeholder influence, and sector support.

The higher education policy context

The appropriate starting point for considering South African higher education policy is the *White Paper of 1997*, which informed the *Higher Education Act* of the same year (Ministry of Education, 1997). The 1997 *White Paper* sets out an agenda for the transformation of higher education from the segregated, inequitable and highly inefficient apartheid institutions, towards a single national system that serves both individual and collective needs. Along with teaching and research, community engagement is cast as one of the pillars of this system. Universities are called upon to “demonstrate social responsibility ... and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes”. A key objective is to “promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes” (ibid., p.10).

This policy position was reaffirmed three years later in the Ministry of Education’s *National Plan for Higher Education* which asserted the priority of enhancing “responsiveness to regional and national needs, for academic programmes, research, and community service” (Ministry of Education, 2001).

 Appropriately, the Higher Education Quality Committee, a sub-structure of the CHE, itself established in terms of the 1997 Higher Education Act, identified “knowledge-based community service” as a basis for programme accreditation and quality assurance. In order to make this policy operational, the HEQC required specific reporting on community engagement against Criterion 18 in institutional audits (CHE, 2004). Considered in the context of international policy and practice, South African policy is both clear and progressive. The outcomes of the quality
assurance audits in relation to community engagement specifically are considered below.

**Funding of research (all sectors)**

For the 2010/2011 funding cycle, the Department of Higher Education and Training allocated a total of R1.8bn to research and R1.6bn to infrastructure improvements in higher education, with a special focus on science, engineering, technology and education. Most of the R1.8bn would be allocated as subsidies for research already produced, and 20% would be used for research development grants.

Funding for research comes from two streams. The first is from the Department of Higher Education for self-initiated academic research. The original idea was that this stream would fund a basic level of research activity among university academic staff and give each member “a well found laboratory” (a model adopted from the British system). As universities grew bigger it no longer made sense to give everyone a “well found laboratory”, and a new funding formula was adopted in 2006. The second stream of funding comes primarily from the Departments of Science & Technology and Trade & Industry. This stream is ‘project’-based, and is directed to the research councils and through the National Research Foundation into the universities. The original idea was that this stream of funding would support promising lines of ‘relevant’ and ‘engaged’ research, provide central facilities, and encourage research in particular fields believed to be of national importance.

A central administrator of funding for research to higher education is the National Research Foundation (NRF). The NRF is an independent government agency that promotes and supports research in key focus areas relevant to South Africa’s development (but see also below). It provides services to the research community, especially at higher education institutions and science councils, with a view to promoting high-level human capital development. Increasingly, the Department of Science & Technology makes targeted grants to institutions, bypassing the NRF. The NRF is, in consequence, increasingly a junior funding partner in the research and development landscape, except when it comes to scholarships for Masters and
doctoral students, and has nowhere the same funding muscle as, say, the ESRC in the UK.

There has continued to be a historical legacy to the uptake of research funds. Over 75% of higher education expenditure on research is spent in six universities (Pandor, 2010). Similarly it appears that not much of the substantial research and development grants from the Departments of Science & Technology, and of Trade and Industry, go to formerly black institutions or technology universities. The low research capacity base and hence low research output record of these institutions is thus caught in something of a vicious circle.

The concept of engagement

Having sketched in broad strokes an overview of the education system, and higher education landscape in particular, in this section we provide a very brief genealogy of the notion of ‘community engagement’ in the South African academy. Here we hope to indicate in what ways ‘engagement’ as a value has been taken up by the academy, and why it is critical to consider historical context when considering the notion.

In a refreshingly candid introduction to a recent volume on university engagement and ‘relevance’, Alan Scott and Alan Harding (2007: 2) comment that in the new competitive higher education climate, research relevance is an insistent refrain in the rhetoric of institutional self-promotion.

‘Whether they consider themselves “world class” and in possession of an “international reputation” … or as essentially “national” or “civic” institutions with fewer international credentials … most claim to produce eminently useful knowledge that can be utilised by a huge range of “communities” but is especially valuable to those living, metaphorically speaking, on the university’s doorstep.’

So it is in South Africa too: universities represent themselves as having the answers to the pressing problems of the communities they serve. In this way, they seek to legitimate themselves to an ever wider set of ever more diverse, and unfortunately, sceptical constituencies. ‘Communities’ are in practice more or less
anything that is in the university’s external environment, and ‘relevance’ can be anything from engaging in policy on national priorities, regional engagements with development projects, to local engagement with poor communities, new links with firms, and simply disseminating results of research. A brief historical review of the concept of community engagement is useful to understand how it has come to be currently configured.

In the mid 1980s, academia in South Africa was a politically turbulent place. The debate around what academics should be doing about apartheid was fierce, and it was conducted at the institutional level (how should the university be more responsive to ‘the community’) and at the individual level (how to be committed and helpful without becoming unwittingly intrusive, or alternatively, handmaidenly ‘useful idiots’ in Lenin’s prescient phrase). The National Education Crisis Committee (NECC), the internal educational arm of the ANC at the time, approached Wits University in 1986 to hold its inaugural Conference there. This led by several steps to the establishment of an Education Policy Unit (EPU) at Wits as a joint university / community venture, to pursue education policy alternatives for a new state after apartheid. EPUs were established at the then University of Natal and the University of the Western Cape as well. These were at the time the only academic education research units (with the exception of the Urban Foundation, the South African Institute of Race Relations and SACHED Trust) to escape the taint of apartheid.

The university pulled towards criteria like publishing and peer review (although in truth not too hard); the NECC sought, naturally enough in the circumstances, ammunition for the education struggle: the former pulled to the long term, the latter to the short term. Academics tried to work around this, but all too frequently felt ‘on the edge’, as the title of one of the papers at the time had it (Muller, 1991).

In 1988 a workshop was held at Wits University examining how other cognate bodies dealt with the tensions. Nearly 30 engaged organisations attended (Hofmeyr & Muller, 1988). Carol Weiss, doyen of research utilization in the USA, attended, to her considerable bemusement. Weiss’ closest point of comparison with the politically supercharged environment of late-apartheid South Africa was, she said,
her experience with black activist community groups in central Harlem in the 1960s. Since then, her reputation had been built on the essentially pragmatic American view that there were at least six different models of research utilisation, and that effectiveness lay in diversity (Weiss, 1976; 1980). None of this seemed relevant to her in South Africa: ‘(But) what can I say about the use of research in South Africa when the situation is increasingly polarised and policies don’t want to be changed?’ (Weiss, 1988: 23).

Weiss’ perplexity reminds us that the relation of research producing agencies to the state is determinative in creating conditions for something as innocuous seeming as ‘mobilisation’, ‘utilization’ or ‘engagement’, all terms that have been, and are, used in academia in South Africa today. In Archer’s (1984) terms, the boundary between the state and the liberal universities was, in the late-apartheid period, a particularly impermeable one. This was to change radically in the 1990s, when the boundary became particularly permeable because the opposition, to which most progressive academia was aligned, became the new state. This too is gradually changing to one of far more cautious and calculated commerce, and it is only very recently that a situation approaching normality has come to prevail. The hard-nosed business of ‘research mobilisation’ is thus as yet a novelty in educational academic circles.

A number of entailments of the late-apartheid period are nevertheless worth recording, since they cast a long shadow over work done up to the present:

- There was a severe shortage of people qualified to produce powerful educational knowledge. The universities had turned out activists skilled in critique, but not in advanced statistics or economics of education. This was the case not only in education, but in the social sciences in general. This shortcoming, together with short-termism and instrumentalism, had the consequence that when the NECC and the ANC came to power, they were simply not supported by an existing nationally produced body of powerful knowledge that made it possible to govern from an informed knowledge base. This lack of capacity continues today, especially with regard to larger scale quantitative work;
Just because engagement was for impeccably good reasons doesn’t mean it can’t produce misleading knowledge, or that it is somehow spared the essential rigors of knowledge validation because it is ‘relevant’ and its heart is in the right place. The danger here is that commitment can bleed into accedance to political imperatives – another dimension of the triumph of the short term in periods of intense social and political turmoil.

During the first decade of democracy in South Africa, a new, somewhat de-politicised idea of engagement entered the educator’s lexicon. ‘Community engagement’ as a constitutive idea, in the form enthusiastically promoted by the American foundations (see for example The Kellogg Commission, 1999), was imported to SA in the 1980s by the American foundations, especially the Ford Foundation (Fehnel, 2007). The idea has an elective affinity with the nineteenth century land-grant ideal of ‘service to the community’ (Lohmann, 2004), but also with American volunteerism, as exemplified by the Peace Corps. Much of the discourse of ‘service learning’ was thus brought to South Africa by well-meaning grant making officers of these American foundations, though without much conspicuous success, at least by their own assessment. (ibid: 160).

The reasons for this are not really hard to find. Since at least the Peace Corps, it has been clear that the real beneficiaries of this service ideal all too often end up being those bringing the benefits, in this case the students. As the Mouton and Wildschut (2007) evaluation of a national service learning project says, in South Africa’s ‘service decade’, roughly up to the mid 2000s, it became clear that it was the students and their tutors who were benefiting most; what ‘the community’ was getting was far less clear. In other words, ‘service learning’ as a form of community engagement always has to struggle with the fact that students are neophytes, not adepts, and with the fact that all too often exactly who the community recipients are or should be is hazy to them.

A third strand of ‘engagement’ entered the lexicon during the deliberations of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE, 1996). This was the notion of ‘mode 2’, emerging from the discredited ruins of an insular, disciplinarily propelled research ‘mode 1’. (Gibbons, et al, 1994). Mode 2 was a sub-set of
‘borderless world’ globalisation optimism, transposed onto research and innovation. It forecast that all research would in future be done in transdisciplinary teams, in a context of use or application, where producers and users would labour together in collaborative harmony. Mode 1, that is, basic research as conventionally practiced in the universities, would whither and die, and all research would in future be ‘engaged’. The NCHE cautiously built this optimism into its final recommendations, which were not explicitly taken up into the White Paper, discussed further below. It did however have a major impact on the National Research Foundation (NRF) grant allocation policy, which for a while allocated grants only to multidisciplinary projects with demonstrable relevance, starving the non-applied sciences and humanities alike, and directing education in a top down fashion. Happily, the following description, found on a Canadian website, rather overstates the case: ‘His (Michael Gibbons’) work has been vigorously taken up by the South African authorities who have adopted the notion of Mode 2 research as a guiding concept during the current, and ongoing, transformation of the South African higher education system’. (www.ouofaweb.ualberta.ca/kusp/pdfs. Retrieved 23 June 2009).

The vogue for mode 2 has since abated. In the end, the mode 2 progenitors did too little too late to distance themselves from epistemological populism and from being used by marginal academic constituencies in their battles for status and standing. Small wonder that the idea caught on, as Nowotny and her co-authors say, everywhere but amongst the mainstream scientific community it was directed at. In South African academia the word is still used on occasion, but the idea that basic research will give way to applied research in a simple linear fashion has gone out of fashion (Hall, 2010).

Before turning to education research specifically, and how engagement manifests in the field of education particularly, in the next section we consider practices of community engagement at the higher education institution level by looking at the

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2 Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons (2003: 180) ruefully note: ‘If nurse researchers pounced on “Mode 2” to reduce their subordination to medical research, or if global accountancy companies placed “Mode 2” at the heart of newly-established “Centres of Business Knowledge” - both of which are actual examples - who were we, the authors, to complain? We had fallen into our own postmodern trap’. 
outcomes of national audits of these institutions carried out by the Higher Education Quality Council.

**Engagement in higher education institutions - the HEQC audits**

As with all other key policy directions, the processes and criteria for evaluating the work of Higher Education institutions in South Africa originated in the White Paper and Higher Education Act of 1997. This provided for the HEQC as a standing committee of the Council for higher education, charged with programme accreditation and institution-wide audits. With regard to community engagement, the HEQC advises that, “where community engagement is discharged through a range of activities, including service learning, quality considerations for institutional engagement with the local and broader community should be formalised within an institution’s quality management policies and procedures. These arrangements should be linked to teaching and learning and research, where possible, and given effect through the allocation of adequate resources and institutional recognition” (CHE, 2004).

Two of the nineteen audit criteria are particularly relevant to community engagement. Criterion 1 requires that “the institution has a clearly stated mission and purpose with goals and priorities which are responsive to its local, national and international context and which provide for transformational issues. There are effective strategies in place for the realisation and monitoring of these goals and priorities. Human, financial and infrastructural resources are available to give effect to these goals and priorities”. The HEQC’s guidelines to institutions to meet this requirement include engagement with local, regional, national and international imperatives in order to establish the fitness of purpose of the institution, and adequate attention to transformational issues in the mission and goal-setting activities of the institution, including issues of community engagement. Criterion 18 is dedicated to community engagement, and specifies that “quality-related arrangements for community engagement are formalised and integrated with those for teaching and learning, where appropriate, and are adequately resourced and monitored”.


The concept of quality encapsulated in the HEQC audit process is regarded, at one and the same time, as a goal to be achieved and as a medium for the continuing transformation of higher education (CHE, 2008). More specifically, the HEQC has understood quality to comprise the fitness for purpose of a university in relation to its stated institutional mission, the effectiveness and efficiency with which the core functions of teaching, research and community engagement are provided, and the opportunities for transformation both for the individual and in more general effect. These aspects are understood to apply within an overall framework of the fitness of purpose of each university in contributing to national priorities.

Institutional audits conducted by the HEQC are intended to look at the totality of the university, in the ways in which each translates its mission and vision into conceptualisations and practices of teaching and learning, research and community engagement. This is captured in Criterion 1 and the requirement that there be “a clearly stated mission and purpose with goals and priorities which are responsive to its local, national and international context and which provide for transformational issues”. The specifics of community engagement are intended to be captured in responses to Criterion 18, which is admirably succinct in requiring simply that there is evidence of appropriate and effective community engagement, and that it is integrated with teaching, learning and research. However, the audit guidelines at present offer no definition of community engagement which can, as a result, be interpreted in terms of the very broad rubric of Criterion 1: transformation, and responsiveness to whichever local, national and international priorities that the institution defines as its key purposes.

While there may be a general understanding of what teaching and research is, there is no such consensus as to the meaning of either “community” or “engagement”, or of how knowledge generated by such activities is to be understood or transmitted. It is therefore not surprising that no clear patterns have emerged in the detailed responses to Criterion 18 in the institutional audits that the HEQC has conducted to date. Audit reports show a range of conceptualisations of community engagement. In most cases, a broad range of activities is reported, including both curricular and extra-curricular, sometimes incorporating research activities, and sometimes not. Most reported activities are
ad hoc, although in a few cases community engagement is reported against a focus that connects with institutional mission and geographical location. Investment of resources is highly uneven. In some cases, community engagement was reported to be the responsibility of a designated person or committee, but in many cases such activities were decentralised and loosely coordinated, if at all. In some cases, community engagement reporting was part of the university’s information management system, but in many cases it was not. “Community” was understood in a wide range of ways: as a form of democratisation, tolerance and pluralism; all stakeholders outside the university; industry and the labour market; local and provincial government; as a place of origin and identity; as debt and accountability; and as anything “other” (CHE, 2008). Again, this diversity of responses is not surprising.

This preliminary scan of the outcomes of the institutional audit process (Hall, 2010) suggests that little of systematic value has been learned of the ways in which public higher education institutions are contributing to the public good as envisaged in the 1997 White Paper and subsequent policy directions. This is unsurprising for, as always, meaningful measurement depends on clearly defined and generally understood definitions of that which is to be measured.

We will see below in the consideration of education research specifically, that the understanding of community engagement is diffuse, and knowledge mobilisation practices difficult to identify and measure adequately. First we give some context to education research in general in South Africa.

**Scale of education research**

The National Survey of Research & Experimental Development (2007/8) indicated that the higher education sector spent R195 917 000 on research activities under the socio-economic objective of ‘education and training’, during the 2007/8 financial year. The nature and extent of education research in South African universities is uneven, and largely follows the patterns described in funding above. Both the capacity to do research in education, and the emphasis placed on research, varies substantially between institutions (Kruss, 2008). Table 2 below
shows the education article output by institution for 2004 (the most recently available data). The data does not show whether these are local or international publications, nor how many academics were responsible for the articles published. The data also do not reflect the relative sizes of the universities / departments. What it does indicate is that the highest publishers are formerly white institutions (UNISA, UP, US and Wits), and that the majority of former black institutions produce less than ten articles in education per year and in some cases none.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Total article output</th>
<th>Education article output</th>
<th>Education as % of total article output</th>
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<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Mangosuthu Technikon</td>
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The table also shows that, apart from the mega-distance institution UNISA, education publications in peer reviewed journals (books and book chapters are not reflected here) represent a small proportion of the total publication output of universities. Comment on the quality of the research will be provided later in the report.

Funding of education research

The main funder of education research in higher education institutions has been the National Research Foundation (NRF). Other significant funders of education research include: Ford Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, Rockefeller Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD),

These donors often set up projects with the aim of knowledge mobilisation built into the project criteria. So for example, when Ford Foundation funded the CHET/HERANA project (more on this below) an initial research agenda was extended to ensure that the research was used to promote information sharing across the continent and to empower various bodies to utilise the data for monitoring and evaluation, and advocacy purposes. Kellogg Foundation also places a strong emphasis in funding on partnerships. Its Innovative Education Practices research agenda aims to encourage innovative education and learning practices - and partnerships between schools, families, communities, government and business - that align and strengthen conditions that ensure healthy, whole child development. A more general emphasis on collaboration, especially between institutions in the interests of strengthening research capacity and generating more robust findings is found across funders.

In the 1990s, the NRF began to stipulate ‘relevant’ research foci in its call for proposals. This greater stipulation of criteria for funding arose from a systematic enquiry by the NRF into education research called ‘Setting a Framework for Education research in South Africa’ in 2009. The enquiry entailed a survey of education research (see below), and the elicitation of concept papers from the education research community in all regions to identify research issues/directions. These thematic areas have become progressively more inclusive: in 2011 grants were allocated to research that fulfilled the following criteria:

- The overarching theme on “Teaching and Learning interactions that shape the qualitative outcomes of education” at all levels of the education and training system
- National priorities in South Africa (a strong indication to be provided)
- Systemic implications (either through large-scale empirical research or meta-analyses of past/existing small-scale research projects)

In the 2011 funding cycle, further, only proposals submitted by consortia were accepted, calling for multi-institutional collaboration, to include at least three different institutions in South Africa, with at least one representing a rural-based institution, and multi-disciplinary collaborations. This follows the global trend towards fostering partnerships and collaborative research. It also indicates that the ‘mode 2’ ideal continues to influence research policy.

**Educational research centres**

A number of structures, including centres, institutes and units, exist within or are aligned to education faculties and departments for the purposes of conducting or managing research\(^3\). As discussed above, many of these research units within higher education institutions were formed just prior to the 1994 democratic elections or shortly thereafter, with the primary focus being the development and implementation of policies and strategies for effective post-apartheid education. Some of the more autonomous units, located within the management/support structures of universities rather than within education faculties, tend towards more contract and self-initiated research, or have a strong focus on providing educational expertise to meet what they perceive as the institution’s educational and strategic needs.

A number of units also house resources such as databases, documentation centres and subject specific libraries, and a few units take responsibility for the publication of academic journals. The units are generally managed by academic staff with the assistance of postgraduate students. Visiting scholars and interns may contribute at various stages of the research process.

\(^3\) Including Wits Education Policy Unit (EPU), mentioned above; Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED), Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST), Centre for Higher and Adult Education, Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE), Centre for Evaluation and Assessment, School for Education Research and Engagement, Centre for Education Practice Research, Institute for Education Research (IER), Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development (CHESD), Centre of Higher Education Studies (CHES), Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL).
There are a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in South Africa whose main purpose is also education research. The main ones include Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET), Southern African Regional University Association (SARUA), Southern African Association for Institutional Research (SAAIR), Centre for Education Policy Development, Evaluation and Management (CEPD), Joint Education Trust (JET) Education Services, South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) and the National Business Initiative (NBI). One of the four national science councils – the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) – conducts extensive research in education. Of the little large-scale research that is undertaken in education in South Africa (see below), most of it is undertaken in these institutions with external donor funding. Higher education institutions neither attract sizable grants to do this work, nor does the institutional capacity, support and experience exist to undertake it.

**Strategies for sharing research and increasing impact**

A number of the research units and NGOs have established policy briefs, networks, centres and initiatives in order to disseminate research findings and involve various stakeholders in understanding their research and implementing recommendations. A few examples are given here. The HSRC has a number of research dissemination strategies, including its Policy Analysis Unit which has been set up specifically to generate policy recommendations based on research evidence. GRIPP, Getting Research into Policy and Practice, as its strategy is known, focuses on three priority areas, namely social policy and poverty, social protection and health, and education and social innovation. It works with a range of partners to enhance the implementation and evaluation of social policy, most notably national government. Other NGOs also have specific strategies aimed at knowledge mobilisation. JET has an Education Evaluation and Research Division (EERD) focusing on research that informs the national education agenda. Most recently this research has focused on large-scale school effectiveness studies, taking a school province (similar to a US state) as target population (Taylor, 2007). The CEPD has a series entitled *Issues in Education Policy*, which comprises a number of booklets on key issues in education. Each booklet deals with one key issue and aims to give the reader an overview of the topic and its implications for various stakeholders - for example,
why certain policies were made in the first place, under what circumstances, what
the experience of implementing the policies has been, what their supporters and
detractors have to say about them, and the main findings of research and policy
evaluations.

There are also a number of projects directly concerned with the link between
research and policy, either as their central aim or as part of a broader project.
CHET has established the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in
Africa (HERANA). The research component of HERANA is focused on the
investigation of the relationships between higher education and development in
the African context. Alongside the research component is an advocacy strategy
that aims to disseminate the findings of the research projects, better co-ordinate
existing sources of information on higher education in Africa, develop a media
strategy, and put in place a policy dialogue (via seminars and information
technology) that facilitates interactions between researchers, institutional leaders
and decision-makers in and out of government. One of the tools is the HERANA
Gateway, which aims to contribute to the development of a network of higher
education expertise in Africa, and to provide a central portal for accessing and
disseminating research-based information on higher education in Africa to relevant
experts and decision-makers (see http://www.herana-gateway.org).

More recently, and reflected in the NRF’s funding priorities cited above, there has
been an attempt to increase the reach and impact of education research by
forming consortia and engaging in research collaboration. An example is the self-
initiated, long-term research programme entitled the Education Policy Consortium
(EPC), made up of the CEPD and the university-based Education Policy Units. The
aim behind the consortium is to contribute to policy debates by ‘introducing
critique and theory into the discourse of public policy and by adopting a
perspective of engaged scholarship’4. This entails providing a critique of social
policies nationally and in comparative international situations, encouraging policy
dialogue and consequently influencing policymakers; and publishing the products
of research in various forms (Motala, 2008). An example of one of the collaborative

4 http://www.cepd.org.za/?q=node/7, accessed 5 December 2010
projects of the consortium was a large-scale project on rural schooling involving the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the HSRC and the higher education members of the EPC (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). Other collaboration partners include NGOs, the National School Governing Body Association, student organizations, state departments and parastatals such as the Human Rights Commission. As the examples above show, the educational research community is only slowly extricating itself from decades of opposition and critique, and is in some ways still stuck in a pre-evidence based mode.

In 2007, the Institute for Higher Education Policy launched a three-year initiative called the Global Policy Fellows (GPF) Program to help develop capacity in higher educational policy-making around the world. The program provided an opportunity for individuals working at government agencies, non-government organizations, professional associations, and university-based research centres to contribute to higher education policy research. Participants from Brazil, Mongolia, the Netherlands, South Africa, Thailand, Ukraine, and the United States took part in the programme. Over a period of two years various initiatives involving higher education policy research aimed at influencing national, regional and even international governments and organisations. Higher education policy models were developed within each country are still being refined and disseminated amongst programme participants and relevant stakeholders (see http://www.ihep.org/).

CREATE (Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity) is a five-year programme of research funded by DFID, with partner institutions in the UK, Bangladesh, Ghana, India, and South Africa. CREATE has developed a collaborative programme of research to analyse policy and practice designed to expand access to basic education for children between the ages of 5 and 15 years. The research attempts to increase knowledge and understanding of the reasons why so many children fail to access and complete basic education. The focus of the CREATE research in South Africa is on equitable access. CREATE has a Communications, Influencing and Dissemination Strategy (CIDS) which is updated on an annual basis. The aim of the CIDS is to disseminate project knowledge and learning arising from the programme to various national and international stakeholders engaged in Education For All (EFA) programmes. The CIDS provides an
overall framework for CREATE’s communications and dissemination activities. These address national and international policy makers, national organisations, NGOs and academic and school communities. The strategies include free publications available to download from the CREATE website or in hard copy; event reports highlighting some of the events CREATE has organised and/or taken part in; policy briefs highlighting the main issues and debates in the field, as well as research findings; bi-annual newsletters; and video clips of researchers talking out issues of educational access also available on the web (see http://www.create-rpc.org/).

Knowledge mobilisation strategies in university education faculties

Finally, a survey of all twenty three university websites was conducted in order to consider evidence of knowledge mobilisation strategies in departments, schools and faculties of education. On their main web pages, almost all 23 universities refer to community engagement /social responsiveness /knowledge transfer as an explicit part of the institution’s activities. Fewer provided clear definitions of what was meant by these terms, and even fewer indicated projects that exemplified the practice. As indicated earlier, there is a conceptual muddle as to what the activity entails, who the community is, and very little hard evidence of impact. Only seven of the departments, schools and faculties of education websites referred to some form of knowledge mobilisation strategy. Most referred to ‘community engagement’, and usually this referred to outreach activities, student volunteerism or community service learning, or some combination of these. Unlike some of the projects and units referred to above, none refer to policy-influence directly, nor clarify the link between research and community involvement. In fact, the relationship between research and its mobilisation is poorly articulated in most instances, and in some, a curious understanding is displayed. An example is from the University of Pretoria, where ‘community engagement’ is framed as ‘enriching’ on the one hand, and as part of a pedagogical strategy on the other: “Community engagement is integrated into teaching and learning, and into research to enrich the knowledge base. The faculty’s mission includes a commitment to ensuring that all undergraduate and postgraduate students have
the opportunity to participate in curriculum- and research-based community engagement as part of their learning experience”.

It is clear from the examples given above, that the importance of the dissemination and ‘mobilisation’ of research knowledge is acknowledged. Although a number of strategies and structures can be identified in projects, there is limited evidence of best practice in mobilising knowledge or strategies that work. So although in the higher education sphere, and in research units and centres and projects there are strategies in place to foster the broader dissemination of research, how much actual transfer is going on, what is transferred and how, remains opaque. There is also a question mark hanging over the quality of the research to be ‘mobilised’. Before considering this question we turn briefly to the ways in which users of research mobilise knowledge.

User-driven mobilisation of research

There is limited evidence of how users of research, such as schools and government agencies, themselves mobilise research. Many of the strategies are highly localised and many are idiosyncratic or very small scale. A number of networks within schooling have, however, made attempts to harness research knowledge to enhance their understanding of practice. One such example is the South African Principals Network. Another is the South African School Governing Body Coalition. The Principals’ Association holds an annual conference in an attempt to present some of the most recent advances in education research. Bodies such as the South African Council of Educators and the Education Labour Relations Council also commission research from time to time, framing particular research questions to be investigated. A large scale nationally representative study on teachers’ workload and time use is one such study that was initiated from the Labour Relations Council (Chisholm et al, 2005).

Because self-generated attempts to mobilise knowledge have been rather half-hearted should not suggest that educational knowledge and expertise has failed to

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make any impact on policy. One of the more indirect ways in which government mobilises research in the South African education sphere has been through a series of Ministerial Committees (or Mincoms, as they have become known). These Committees are set up by the Minister with a specific mandate. Though not always representative, these Mincoms generally include a number of academics able to harness current thinking and research on a particular issue, which they bring to bear on the issue in question, by collating the existing primary research in the area. Mincoms have focused on curriculum, on school management and on further education and training (FET) colleges. Several Mincoms have been tasked with conducting primary research themselves, for example on racism in higher education, and on ‘schools that work’ in socially marginal communities (Christie et al, 2007; Soudien et al, 2008). The ‘research’ of these Mincoms is generally conducted quickly and superficially, and rarely makes an original or reliable contribution to the research knowledge base.

The Mincoms have been conducted with varying degrees of success. What is interesting about them is the way in which research, through members, is potentially brought directly to bear on policy decision-making, in the form of the inevitable recommendations that flow from the Mincom report, and thence into a governmental Green or White Paper.

The national and provincial departments of education also commission research from the education research community. One of the problems encountered in this regard is the limited capacity from within government to identify and frame the appropriate questions on the one hand, and the ability to read and interpret research and its implications on the other. Both these aspects - Mincoms and government processes of commissioning research - would be fruitful avenues for further research in considering the question of knowledge mobilisation.

We return in the next section to the question of the quality of the research base in education in South Africa, a crucial question when thinking through the mobilisation of that knowledge.

Research quality
The most up to date and recent overview of education research output in South Africa is *Audit and Interpretative Analysis of Education Research in South Africa: What Have We Learnt?* (Deacon, Osman & Buchler, 2009). The study was commissioned by the NRF with the aim of compiling a comprehensive database, and undertaking an analysis, of any research projects that had anything to do with education research in South Africa over the twelve years between 1995 and 2006.

A database of 10,315 texts was constructed, drawing on data on education-related research, broadly defined, whether published or unpublished. The texts were drawn from, amongst others, university libraries or collections, the national Department of Education, public institutions and councils, education NGOs and research units, publishers of education books, donor agencies, South Africa-based education journals, as well as from searches of national and international databases. Of the 10,315 texts in the database, 45% are journal articles, 25% are conference papers and proceedings, 14% reports, 7% chapters in books, 6% are theses, and 3% books. Up to 35% of all the research is authored by more than one person.

Of the journal articles, approximately 73% were published in South African journals of education, 24% in another South Africa-based journal and only 27% in international journals. In other words, the extent of international publishing, and hence exposure of the research to the international peer community is limited. The majority (49%) of these articles were published in one South African-based journal of education.

The study found that 48% of education research in South Africa focuses on the classroom level, 38% on the systemic level, 11% on the institutional level and 3% on the out-of-school level. Considering *scale*, 94% of education research has been small-scale research, and usually qualitative in nature. Very little large scale research has taken place, with only 1% of the database falling into this category. Most large-scale education research is at the systemic level, while most case studies are of classrooms. In terms of *educational sector*, formal schooling makes up 48% of the database, with the higher education sector following at 32%. The researchers argue that there has been hardly any large scale or quantitative
research in educational research over the past 12 years, but a great deal of small scale and qualitative research, generally unfocused, unstructured and uncoordinated. The paucity of generalisable empirical research has resulted in a corpus of limited value for either pedagogic practice or policy making.

Karlsson et al (2009) reports some interesting findings from the first analysis of data from the Postgraduate Education Research Database (PPER), established by UKZN. The research set out to provide an overview of what postgraduate education research has been undertaken in South Africa, both in terms of subject, and in terms of methodological approach. The research covers the 1995 to 2004 period. A total number of 3 260 theses were recorded on the PPER database. The study found that most of the postgraduate education research in South Africa comprises studies towards a Masters degree. Postgraduate educational research is largely qualitative and the predominant methodological approach is the case study. Mirroring education in general, postgraduate research is also small-scale and focussed mainly on schooling.

This analysis reveals a problem not only in knowledge mobilization practices and evidence of their efficacy or impact, but also with the kind of knowledge being produced for mobilisation. Further, the understanding of what is entailed in these ‘engagement’ practices appears to be limited. It is probably rare, given the fragmented and small-scale nature of most education research, that other users, such as government departments, schools and private entities would be able to find relevant research easily and to use it with any degree of confidence.

Some concluding issues

Despite a relatively rich history of engagements with ‘engagement’, the South African educational research community has not moved effectively into the domain of evidence led research and effective knowledge mobilisation practice. Some of the reasons for this, explored above, include the following:
● The size of the research-active community remains comparatively small, as can also be seen from the relatively small corpus of published journal articles per annum;

● The capacity of the community is thus relatively restricted, and the range of research work produced is overwhelmingly small scale, school rather than system based, practitioner oriented, and qualitative. The corpus is thus fragmented and non-cumulative. The amount of quantitative research is vanishingly small (Taylor, 2007);

● There is no clear idea about what ‘research engagement’ might mean, let alone ‘research mobilisation’. There is evidently some work to be done in this regard.

The travails of the research community aside, there are also some exogenous forces which might restrict the possibilities even further. A premier candidate is the direction research funding seems to be taking globally. In a recent UNESCO publication edited by Meek, Teichler and Kearney (2009: 20), Marie-Louise Kearney worries about a potential exclusive ‘focus on application-driven project funding or on problem-oriented research cooperation to the exclusion of basic, “blue skies” research’ and goes on to warn that ‘The familiar catch words of relevance and utility need to be treated with caution. Relevance is vital, but truly useful knowledge can be discovered in various ways’. As we showed above in the case of the NRF, they have followed the trend towards ‘relevance’, although there are signs of a change of direction. Recently, the NRF was persuaded by the chorus of critique coming from academia to drop their focus area programmes and divert this money to open competition grants, even establishing a dedicated programme for funding what they call ‘blue skies’ research. The debate around relevance has not been particularly sophisticated or helpful (see Hall, 2010; Muller, 2010), and tends to get stuck in the either-or dichotomy of basic or applied. An interesting alternative is provided by the longitudinal empirical and analytical work of David Cooper (2009), which draws together a number of strands that herald the emergence of a third way, more helpfully ‘development’ oriented discourse of engagement in South Africa.

Cooper introduces the idea that if we think in very long wave cycles, we can discern, also in South Africa, that the world entered a ‘third capitalist industrial
revolution’ in the 1970s, led by ICT, biotechnology, fibre optic technology, material science, nanotechnology and the like. Symbiotically coupled to this he notes the emergence in the 1980s of a ‘third university mission’ (the first two being teaching and research), namely, a mission to contribute to the socio-economic development of society. What this has meant in practical terms is a huge growth in industry and government funding for university based research. What kind of research Cooper set out to discover.

He chose eleven university based research groups, collecting data from them three times in a seven year period. Although he chose all but one of the groups on the basis of their applied orientation, he was surprised to find that not only were they doing applied research, but that a good proportion of their work could far better be regarded as ‘use-inspired basic research’, after Stokes (1997). Moreover, he also came to see that what industry and government bodies sought from university based research centres was either use-inspired basic, or even just basic, research. From universities of technology, they sought orthodox applied research. Cooper concludes that the emerging national system of innovation requires, and will increasingly demand from research-based universities, the fundamental good ideas which in-house R & D operations cannot supply. This applies equally to government and industry, and probably to community groups too.

Cooper’s account helps explain why ‘development’, both national and regional, has increasingly entered the vocabulary of politicians and higher education policy makers. A recent World Bank report (Yusuf et al, 2008) makes the case for African higher education to help ‘accelerate’ growth, and a project of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) is pursuing university - firm linkages in sub-Saharan Africa (HSRC Review, 2009). We should not imagine that this form of engagement with the world outside the university will always be smooth, or produce virtuous effects. In addition to the ever-present fears about the smothering effects on fundamental research, the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA), investigating higher education - development linkages in eight African countries, is finding a worrying trend. In universities where the ‘academic core’ is relative small, and with consequently only a small number of research active staff, donor project funding tends to draw the African scholars out of the
university instead of providing means for strengthening the academic core inside the institution. The result seems to be a persistent de-institutionalisation in the very places where the institution is in need of being shored up. This should act as a general warning: external networks are good, but only if they do not prosper at the expense of the nurturing institution.

Cooper worries that while university links to government and industry (the so-called ‘triple helix’) are intensifying, the civic domain of civil society appears to be the poor cousin, a node that has not received the attention it perhaps deserves since the struggle engagements of the 1980s, despite the lip service on education faculty websites we noted above.

Finally, university-based ‘epistemic communities’ (Haas, 1992) have increasingly to deal with competition from NGOs that compete with them for epistemic influence over policy makers and users like schools (Schwartzman, 2010). Some of these NGOs are international and backed by powerful funders. The advice given by these NGOs is less fastidious about epistemic niceties and more concerned with interest-driven agendas. The terrain of knowledge mobilisation is set to become far messier in the future.

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