THE USER & THE UNIVERSITY

Inside the walls of the universities the users are coming into play in a way we have never seen before. **There are many benefits if researchers engage with students**, teachers and other knowledge users. Education Alliance Magazine has asked leading researchers why knowledge mobilisation is about engagement.

By CAMILLA MEHLSEN

* People power has grown in the last decade – or rather, the power of the user. In 2006, 'you' – the user – overtook billionaires and presidents and topped the American *Time Magazine*'s annual list of the most influential people and the Person of the Year award. An editorial from *Time Magazine* explains why the power of the user is rising:

"It's a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes."

Time Magazine's election echoes a shift, not just in the technological development from one-way communication to social media but also in business and society. The user is not just some stupid guy or girl who buys a

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product or votes every now and then. The user has a voice and it may be a very good idea to listen to it.

The user also plays a greater role in research. Inside the walls of universities the users are coming into play in a way we have never seen before.

Empowerment of the user

There are several tendencies leading towards more user-orientated research. One strong tendency is that we see a 'democratisation of knowledge' and an empowerment of the user these days. Universities no longer have a monopoly on knowledge, partly because the internet has made it possible for everybody with an internet connection to obtain new knowledge.

According to a leading expert in knowledge mobilisation, Professor Sandra Nutley from the University of Edinburgh, the patient is a good example of this trend.

"In the medical world we have seen an empowerment of the patient. Today the patient looks up information on Google and other websites and discusses symptoms with the doctor in new ways," said Professor Sandra Nutley at the conference 'Mobilising Knowledge in Education Research' held by the International Alliance of Leading Education Institutes (IALEI) at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto in June 2011.

A research team from the ten IALEI member countries was gathered to share and discuss their findings from a new study on knowledge mobilisation with representatives from the OECD and the World Bank as well as other researchers and practitioners.

At the conference one message came through again and again: universities need to engage more with their users – who may very well become knowledge producers. As stated in the report *Educational Knowledge Mobilisation and Utilisation in Singapore* by the IALEI researchers from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore:

More recently, there is a recognition that knowledge users, and not just researchers, can and should play an important role in knowledge production and shaping innovation. >

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Professor **Wing On Lee**

✖ STUDY FRIENDSHIP. Users can set the research agenda. In a British review researchers asked pupils and teachers what to study – and they chose 'relationships'. The researchers may not have chosen this topic, but 'how to make and keep friends' is a crucial issue for children.

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Everyone can potentially benefit from research and be a user of research knowledge – as a teacher, journalist, counsellor, politician, school leader, academic, student, doctor, and so on.

"Knowledge should not be held by a few privileged members and groups in society. Anyone can be a user of research," says Professor David Gough. He is Director of the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) at the Institute of Education, University of London. Professor Gough and his colleagues study user driven research production and research use, and he argues in favour of a stronger connection between research and the use of research.

"We require a more strategic approach to research in education and ways to include student, parent and teacher voices in the setting of research agendas in education. It is the people who are making decisions in education who need to be more closely involved in research agenda setting," he says.

"Many people aim to improve communication of research but this is only a necessary not sufficient condition. We also need to ensure that the research is fit for purpose. Hence the need for user perspectives in driving research agendas."

Professor Gough tells an example of how pupils and teachers at Hatch End High School in the UK have set the research agenda for a review conducted by researchers attached to the EPPI-Centre. The researchers asked the pupils and teachers what they wanted to know – and they chose 'relationships' as the topic for the review. The pupils and teachers wanted to know what schools can do to improve young people's relationships with each other, with teachers and with their families. So the research team looked in more detail at school programmes that encourage conflict resolution and peer mediation. The research group may not have chosen this topic themselves, but 'how to make and keep friends' is a crucial issue for children. It is also a key question for schools, policy makers and pressure groups since many school programmes have relationships at their core.

From product to service

At the conference 'Mobilising Knowledge in Education Research', several of the IALEI researchers highlighted the importance of engaging with one of the universities' key users – the students – in education research. One of them was Professor Wing On Lee from the National Institute for Education in Singapore: "We always think of the students as passive but they are not at all. If the students engage, they jump," he said.

"The more we do school reforms, the more we find out that knowledge can take place in the classroom. Students and teachers can produce knowledge and not just researchers. Knowledge mobilisation is not top-down. It is about engagement," Professor Lee said.

The university of previous centuries was indeed top-down and it did not have to care much about how research knowledge was used outside the walls of the university. That has changed dramatically.

According to Professor Sandra Nutley, the use of research is becoming a more important subject for universities. She sees an overall shift in focus from production to *use* – from how research is produced to how research is used. But, according to Professor Nutley, universities are relatively new to this path. There is still a long way to go to become a service university.

"If we stick with the idea that the university has a role of serving society – and not just knowledge for knowledge's sake – we need to think about ways of operating. At the moment we very much have a model in many countries where we think of research as a product. We produce research. We may involve people in defining our research priorities, etc. but often our main mobilisation activities are – if they occur at all – bolted on at the end. That does not seem to be the best way to have an influence if you want to serve society," Sandra Nutley says.

"If you try to commission research influence and provide a service that identifies what people need to know and how to help them to apply it, you would work in different ways than most universities do today. Co-production and engagement would not just be an option. It would be inevitable for all researchers," she says.

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Sandra Nutley explains that the whole idea of research being used involves some elements of co-production because of the translation process.

"For universities we will need to think about how you measure productivity. If you take the idea of research being used seriously, you will no longer measure productivity in terms of the number of publications – and counting the university's products. You will have to think about the nature of the university as a service and the features of a good service," she says.

According to Sandra Nutley, we need to move from the idea of 'better packaging' and 'better wrapping' of research to something much more interactive.

"Knowledge mobilisation is a process where context, interaction and ongoing dialogue are important. We

need to work with others to translate research knowledge. Research never speaks for itself. Research has to be translated into the context in which it might be useful. In that process, knowledge becomes refined and contextualised," she says.

Growing demand for knowledge

Professor Ben Levin from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto shares Sandra Nutley's opinion that 'research never speaks for itself'.

"Just doing research is insufficient. Of course we have to do the research to have any knowledge to be mobilised, but knowledge mobilisation is increasingly becoming a major part of the role of the universities. If we do not have a world in which it is easy for people to find out what kind of research is going on in the universities – and today that is not the case – then we do not get the full value of the research," Levin says.

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Professor Levin is author of the book *How to Change 5000 Schools* and leader of the 2011 IALEI research team on mobilising knowledge in education research. According to Ben Levin, there is a growing demand from society for research-based knowledge on education.

"The need for knowledge mobilisation is greater because we have more knowledge. We know more from education research than we did 20 years ago so this research has more potential to make a difference. For example, we know a lot more about how to teach children to read than we used to. We want to make sure that the teachers know that, so they can use effective reading practices. We know a lot more about how to motivate and engage students and how important that is. That is why knowledge mobilisation is important," he says.

But who has the overall responsibility for mobilising knowledge in education research? The individual researcher, the faculty or the university, the ministry of education or some kind of transnational organisation? Professor Sandra Nutley is known internationally for her work on research use and evidence-based policy and practice and she has a very clear answer: "That is such an important question because today it is often no one's responsibility."

The growing demand for knowledge mobilisation does not go hand in hand with the universities' current priority list, especially not when it comes to research in education.

"If you compare education to other fields of university work like science and technology, you can see that there are quite well-developed mechanisms at the institutional level in universities to connect the work of researchers to the larger community. In education we tend to lack those connections," Professor Ben Levin says. He explains that while universities and faculties of education have a very profound interest in sharing their research and making it available, the mechanisms to do so remain poorly developed.

"By that I mean that the systems and structures inside the university to support knowledge mobilisation are weak. There is a large reliance on the individual researcher as opposed to an institutional endeavour. There is a general recognition in the IALEI country papers that universities can do better when it comes to education research," he says.

Better infrastructure

According to Professor Levin, universities need to build an infrastructure to support knowledge mobilisation.

"If I am a chemist who develops a new product, the university has patent and spin-off companies, etc. That is all done for me. In education, I have to do it all by myself. There is no infrastructure to support it at all. There is no money for it. It is no one's job so it doesn't get done," he says.

Ben Levin explains that in most of the IALEI countries education research remains a small enterprise. It is not very well funded in relation to the size of the sector, and it tends not to be very well organised either. In most places education research is a lot of small-scale work, he says.

Ben Levin emphasises that universities and researchers should build stronger external connections and more interpersonal connections that make a difference.

"In the academic world everything is about putting things on paper: into writing. But we know that reading things does not change people's behaviour. If you do research in pedagogies, you want to connect with teachers and associations. One thing we know about knowledge mobilisation is that it is rarely a direct link between a researcher and a 'research user'. It is a much more diffuse process that works largely through intermediary organisations. Those connections happen largely through events and networks. We need to think in a systematic way to give research a higher prominence in the whole educational process."

One question leaps out: Where do researchers get the time to engage with practitioners, politicians, the media, and so on? They already spend a lot of time on other activities that are not directly research-related, such as teaching, applying for external funding, and presentations. According to Professor Levin, lack of time is a wrong excuse.

"The best researchers are often the best teachers and the most active 'research mobilisers'. We found in a recent study of Canadian research education that there is a very clear link: the people who do most peer-reviewed publishing also do the most non-academic communication. They write more summaries and recommendations; they organise more workshops and events, and so on. The people who are most involved with knowledge mobilisation are also the people who are most peer-reviewed."

If universities had an annual Top 100 list, the 'Best Researcher of the Year' might be the same person as the 'Best Research Mobiliser of the Year'. ■