Assessing the quality of applied and practice-based education research

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The framework presented here draws on work carried out with funding from the ESRC by John Furlong and Alis Oancea, 2004-2005, University of Oxford
Structure

- Recent considerations of quality in social and education research
- Rationale and aims
- Strategy
- Applied and practice-based research – a definition
- Rethinking quality in current research evaluation procedures
- Perspectives on the nature of research in relation to practice and policy
- A wider understanding of quality
- Contextualisation and weighing
An audit culture?

- Rationalised public control
- Undermining trust (Power, 1994)
- Quality as auditability. Shortcomings: narrow concept, confusions and distortions, excessively technicised, excessive comparison and hierarchy, procrustianism and manipulation (Santos-Guerra, 1999).
A culture of evaluation

- oriented towards action, learning and the future;
- accessibility; diversity; inclusiveness; participation;
- responsibility; self-criticism;
- interdisciplinarity;
- honesty; ethical and democratic character;
- a new social contract for science.
Recent considerations of quality in social research

1. RAE 2008
   - **originality**: research which is not merely a replication of other work or simply applies well-used methods to straightforward problems, but which engages with new or complex problems or debates and/or tackles existing problems in new ways (*education, psychology, politics*); intellectually innovative character of the research (*sociology*)
   - **rigour**: methodological and theoretical robustness and the use of a systematic approach; sound background of scholarship, in the sense of familiarity and engagement with relevant literature, both substantive and methodological (*education, psychology*); sensitivity to a plurality of approaches and methods (*politics*); robustness of the argument and methodology, and the appropriateness of method(s) (*sociology*)
   - **significance**: effects on the development of the field, examining contributions to existing debates, and impacts on policy and practice (*education, psychology*); potential and actual (*politics*) moving agendas forward; promoting interdisciplinarity; raising profile of discipline; new audiences (*sociology*)
Recent considerations of quality in social research

2. SCIE: Types and quality of knowledge in social care (Pawson et al, 2004)
   - Framework:
     - Transparency – are the reasons for it clear?
     - Accuracy – is it honestly based on relevant evidence?
     - Purposivity – is the method used suitable for the aims of the work?
     - Utility – does it provide answers to the questions it set?
     - Propriety – is it legal and ethical?
     - Accessibility – can you understand it?
     - Specificity – does it meet the quality standards already used for this type of knowledge?
Recent considerations of quality in social research

3. Quality in social policy research
   (Becker and Bryman, University of Birmingham, 2005)
     - Survey – perceptions of quality in quantitative and qualitative research: traditional and alternative criteria
Recent considerations of quality in social research

4. LSRC/LSDA Models of Research Impact
   (Nutley and Morris, 2003)
   - Translation
   - Enthusiasm
   - Contextualisation
   - Credibility
   - Leadership
   - Support
   - Integration

5. RURU Review of research impact
   (Nutley et al)
   - Salience
   - Credibility
   - Active dissemination
   - Communication
   - Facilitation
Recent considerations of quality in social research


- Contribution to knowledge/understanding
- Defensibility of design
- Rigour in conduct (and systematicity)
- Credibility of claims (and plausibility and groundedness of argument)

- Questions applied to: findings, design, sample, data collection, analysis, reporting, reflexivity and neutrality, ethics, auditability
Recent considerations of quality in social research

7. ESRC's Research Evaluation Committee

- Impact evaluation (incl. non-academic impact), bibliometrics, international benchmarking

Geoff Crossick of the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) and Ian Diamond of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) expressed a shared commitment to finding new ways of measuring the volume, impact and quality of research in the non-science disciplines. While some research outcomes can be measured directly, Crossick argued, others can only be inferred by proxies and used to inform and underpin qualitative judgements. However, such analyses must take account of the specificities of a very wide and diverse subject community with a new culture of funded team projects but within which the individual researcher remains very important.
Recent considerations of quality in social research

8. Oancea and Furlong, 2005: Assessing quality in applied and practice-based educational research

- RAE 2008 criteria
- ESRC documents
- AERS documents
Rethinking quality in current research evaluation procedures

- Part of a wider process of complex changes
- Internal and external worthiness: no absolutes!
- Need to cater for
  - Plurality in research: emerging modes of research – Gibbons; Etzkowitz, diverse contexts of knowledge production and use;
  - Evolving models of research evaluation; multiple interest groups/ communities and interpretations of quality; wider set of criteria
  - Changing relationship between research and society; new institutional structures and pressures
  - Nature, claims and specific contribution of applied and practice based research Embededddness of knowledge in professional activity and personal growth
Furlong and Oancea, 2004-2005: Objectives

- Clarifying the concepts employed in current discourses about applied and practice-based education research
  - Mapping relevant initiatives in the UK
  - Exploring the philosophical underpinnings of the different models, their claims to knowledge and the criteria for assessing quality that they entail
Objectives

- Reviewing quality criteria (current and aspired) employed by the recent UK initiatives concerning applied and practice-based research
- Working towards developing an understanding of quality that would cater for the diversity of modes of research and of communities of interest
Strategy

- Literature reviews
- Interviews with key persons
- Consultation: working day (16 July 2004); support group; and witness sessions
Applied and practice-based research

Multitude of models of research explicitly conducted in, with, and/or for practice

In-between academia-led theoretical pursuits and research-informed practice

Multidimensional concepts:
No agreed definitions!
Wider social robustness?

**Traditional definitions of quality:**
- methodological rigor
- and conceptual/theoretical solidity

**Alternative definitions of quality:**
- about people and practices, not just methodological rigor

**Quality criteria**
- High public visibility (codified and institutionalised)
- Low visibility in the policy and funding arena (fluid norms)
Applied and practice-based research - facets of quality

- Concerned with practice
- Applied and practice-based research and policy touch at the level of:
  - Codified knowledge, but also
  - Social processes and institutional frameworks
  - Values and implicit knowledge
  - Professional development
  - Personal growth of individuals
- Our concept of quality needs to be enlarged
Perspectives on the nature of research in relation to practice and policy

- **Episteme** - explaining and understanding. Theoretical, explanatory, demonstrative; Universals, context independent, explicitness. Danger: ivory-towerism

- **Economic** investment – trading. Danger: audit culture
Perspectives on the nature of research in relation to practice and policy

**Techne** – technology and art; product oriented; context dependent; practical/instrumental rationality; explicitness. Research informing practice and policy. Danger: technocracy

**Phronesis** (practical wisdom) – deliberating about ethics and values and ‘acting’; process-oriented; practical rationality; ontology. Characteristics: ethical and axiological; critical and reflexive; tacit and embedded in action; dialogical; aspirational and democratic. Danger: narrowness.

Phronetic social sciences? Flyvbjerg (2001)
A wider understanding of quality

## Dimensions of quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epistemic: methodological and theoretical robustness</th>
<th>Technological: value for use</th>
<th>Phronetic and critical: capacity building and value for people</th>
<th>Economic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Purposivity</td>
<td>Plausibility</td>
<td>Marketability and competitiveness</td>
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<td>Builds on what is known and contributes to knowledge</td>
<td>Salience/timeliness</td>
<td>Partnership, collaboration and engagement</td>
<td>Cost-effectiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explicitness</td>
<td>Specificity and accessibility</td>
<td>Reflexivity, deliberation and criticism</td>
<td>Auditability</td>
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<td>Propriety</td>
<td>Concern for enabling impact</td>
<td>Receptiveness</td>
<td>Feasibility</td>
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<td>Paradigm-dependant criteria</td>
<td>Flexibility and operationalisability</td>
<td>Transformation and personal growth</td>
<td>Originality</td>
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### Quality sub-dimensions

- **Scientific robustness**
- **Social & economical robustness**
Contextualisation and weighting

Contextualisation involves:
- Selecting dimensions
- Developing criteria
- Deciding thresholds

... and depends on:
- nature and claims of the project under assessment
- aim of the evaluation
- focus of assessment
- aims and context of the evaluator
Thank you!

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