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Building a resilient educational researcher community

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ABSTRACT

Supporting the ongoing development of educational researchers can be more challenging than supporting the development of other researchers because they work across the university in different disciplines and centres. This small-scale qualitative study explored the motivation and engagement of educational researchers at a UK university, the support that helped them and their perceived strengths in research skills. Future development hopes and needs were also expressed. The aim was to better understand ourselves (self-identifying educational researchers), individually and collectively, to help us to build an educational research community for future collaborative research projects. Participants demonstrated altruistic motivations as well as those linked to personal fulfilment and professional need. Specific hopes reported included the desire to work with collaborative research groups. The findings can aid educational researchers and their employers to better recognise educational researchers at an institutional level; to understand the needs of this disparate group; to build a sustainable community and to support the design of development opportunities locally, university-wide and externally, through personalised provision and peer support and mentoring. The study also provides a framework for further research.

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Introduction

There has been a rise in awareness of, and opportunities for, researcher development over the last two decades, with a focus on ongoing development. The UK led the way in creating formal researcher development programmes, largely through the influential Vitae organisation which is dedicated to researcher development. Researcher development is often generic rather than discipline specific, with tensions associated with working centrally and across disciplines (Blumenstein et al. 2015; Saunders 2009). Fowler et al. (2009) looked at building research capacity through enhancing educational researcher development in the UK. They concluded that research capacity is built through expansive research workplaces that are supportive and provide a range of learning opportunities and openings for engagement with research communities. Fowler et al. (2009) also highlighted the importance of collaboration with other institutions, to promote educational research capacity. This article presents findings from a small-scale research project that sought to better understand the educational research community within a post-92 University,¹ their development needs, and how best to support them. We start by exploring who are educational researchers, and where they are located.

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Educational researchers and their location – implications for their development

The field of educational research is complex, and the provenance of educational researchers is equally complex. While educational researchers may sit within Schools of Education, or Educational Research Centres and have a background in education studies, many, such as teacher educators, come to educational research following other careers. The challenges for teacher educators in becoming research active include a strong identity as a teacher, low self-confidence in relation to academic/research roles, ambivalent attitudes to research and lack of induction into research (Griffiths, Thompson, and Hryniewicz 2010; Hulme and Sangster 2013; Labaree 2003; Murray and Male 2005; White et al. 2014). There can be a cultural gap to transcend between being a member of the teaching profession and becoming a faculty member of a School of Education (Labaree 2003). Not all educational researchers are located within education-focussed research centres, departments or schools within universities but are, specifically in relation to those educational researchers focussing on higher education (HE) research, a disparate interdisciplinary group, often scattered across a university. Educational researchers from other disciplines have been found to experience struggles in negotiating a shift from their own discipline to education, and participating in an educational researcher development programme has supported a change in identity (Whitton, Parr, and Choate 2021). For these researchers, there is often a split between policy-based and pedagogic researchers (Brankovic 2020; Tight 2015), divided by what Macfarlane (2012, 129) has termed a 'Sea of Disjuncture', itself further fragmented through specialisation (Daenekindt and Huisman 2020).

Within the subset of HE research, there is further complexity and confusion over the distinction between pedagogic research and scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Cotton, Miller, and Kneale 2018). SoTL is 'a model used in the HE sector ... to reflect on, and transform, teaching and learning practices' (Fanghanel et al. 2016, 3) whereas pedagogic research is planned, systematic and sustained enquiry, which is subjected to public scrutiny and to empirical testing as appropriate (Moron-Garcia and Willis 2009), and is valued in HE (Stierer and Antoniou 2004; Yorke 2000). Conflating SoTL and pedagogic research can undervalue the latter (Cotton, Miller, and Kneale 2018). Both activities can and do inform teaching. Educational researchers, who focus on pedagogy, undertake research that is concerned with improving practice, cascading from their own professional practice and practice within their institution, to research-informed development across the sector (Stierer and Antoniou 2004). Often it is small-scale and conducted alongside disciplinary research and involves a new and unfamiliar body of literature and methodology from disciplinary research (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019). Pedagogic research is not limited to HE institutions but is also carried out in schools and other places where education takes place.

From the wide-ranging contexts in which education takes place (including HE, further education, schools, specialist provision) come an equally diverse group of burgeoning educational researchers who are engaged in postgraduate research programmes to further develop their understanding of education. Engagement in higher-level qualifications, such as Professional Doctorates in Education, has grown globally, providing professional development opportunities to practitioners (Wildy, Peden, and Chan 2015) and these students bring their own professional practice and research experiences into the community.

Such diversity is reflected in both the methodological approaches that educational researchers employ and the topics that they focus on. In a review of research methods used by educational researchers, experimental research, descriptive research, correlational study, and comparative approach were frequently used, with a trend towards more qualitative methods (Hsu 2005). In HE research, the methods most frequently found were surveys and multivariate analyses, documentary analyses, interviews, auto/biographical and observational studies, conceptual analysis and phenomenography (Tight 2013). Tight (2015) examined Becher's model of academic tribes and territories applied within HE research, listing many subdisciplinary areas including academic cultures, sub-cultures and identities. Through a systematic review of meta-analyses of HE research eight key

themes were identified including teaching and learning, course design and student experience (Tight 2019).

The diverse range of people engaged in educational research, the different locations in which they are sited, the varied methodological approaches adopted, and the many topic areas addressed contribute to a dynamic community but can also pose some challenges when supporting their development as researchers.

Development of educational researchers

While much of the researcher development is generic (Blumenstein et al. 2015; Saunders 2009), researcher developers encounter staff and students from across the university, and as Guerin (2021, 518) states 'conduct their work in the borderlands between academic disciplines and university administration'. This is accentuated when looking at the development of educational researchers, who, as indicated above, are found across academic disciplines. Research relating to the development of educational researchers specifically is often focussed on a subgroup such as teacher educators (Griffiths, Thompson, and Hryniewicz 2010; Murray and Male 2005) or those within a university School of Education (Hulme and Sangster 2013; Lucas 2007; White and Dickerson 2020; White et al. 2014) or within a wider group of research-active academics from different disciplines (Guerin 2021; van Winkel et al. 2018). Supporting ongoing development of educational researchers can pose greater challenges than supporting the development of other researchers because they inhabit much wider spheres.

Another factor affecting the development of educational researchers is the value that institutions put on their inclusion in the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF). The REF is a national research excellence evaluation exercise that assesses the quality of research at UK universities in order, in REF 2021, to inform the allocation of research grants to universities funded by the government; to provide accountability for public investment and to benchmark the HE sector (REF 2021 2022).

The diverse nature of the educational research community brings particular challenges for engagement in the REF (Torrance 2020). The varied backgrounds and different trajectories into educational research may mean that educational researchers are disadvantaged when it comes to attaining 'world-leading' research (Torrance 2020, 774). The prevalence of smaller-scale and close-to-practice research within educational research without adequate approaches to assessing the quality of such focussed work means that an important form of educational research, pedagogic research can be undervalued within the sector (Evans et al. 2021). Pedagogical research and SoTL are ways of developing professional practice (teaching), however their inclusion, and the value given to them, in the REF continues to be contentious (Cotton, Miller, and Kneale 2018; Tierney 2020), and particularly so when disciplinary pedagogic research often has lower status than disciplinary research (Evans et al. 2021). Such views can perpetuate the divide (or as Torrance (2020, 775) states, 'wedge') between research and teaching, with promotion criteria clearer for those who engage more in subject-based research than pedagogic research (Canning and Masika 2022, 1090). This divide also raises questions for those engaged in the development of educational researchers.

This small-scale case study seeks to look at self-identifying educational researchers across a University, to explore the foundations that are in place, and those additional foundation blocks that the researchers feel they need – and to foster a stronger educational research community and consider how to build and develop for the future. From the findings of this case, points are offered to stimulate self-awareness and reflection for any university seeking to build and foster a resilient educational researcher community.

Context of the study and positionality

This study was carried out in a post-92 University. In common with many newer universities created from former polytechnics and colleges of higher education in England and Wales, the

University emphasises the importance of teaching, and some staff may feel that teaching is valued more highly than research (Griffiths, Thompson, and Hryniewicz 2010). Academics in these universities can find bringing together their teaching, research and professional practice demanding because each of these domains has its own goals and standards (van Winkel et al. 2018). Whilst developing an identity as an educational researcher can be challenging (Murray and Male 2005; White et al. 2014; Whitton, Parr, and Choate 2021), belonging to a network may provide opportunities for situated learning in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Lucas 2007).

Within this University there are educational researchers focussing on HE and other phases of education, development of professional identity and efficacy, language development, leadership, learning and pedagogy, subject specific pedagogy in line with their own discipline, and other aspects of education. They are found within the former School of Education and across other Schools and supporting Centres within the University. There is also a relatively large community of doctoral researchers focussing on education, through principally, a professional doctorate in education (EdD), which includes staff members from within the University, alongside education and training professionals from outside.

Educational research, at this University, is on a trajectory from no submission to the REF in 2014, to submission in 2021, demonstrating growth in strength and recognition as a community of educational researchers, and providing a foundation for further growth and development. This community of researchers is served by an institutional educational research network (henceforth Network), launched in 2018, providing a means of cross-fertilisation of ideas and skills to overcome segregation and, hopefully, being the seedbed of new research interdisciplinary initiatives attracting funding and valuing educational research within the University. Additionally, an objective in the University strategic plan is to deliver teaching enriched by research and supported through a central unit with a focus on learning and teaching innovation, with members of this unit represented in the Network.

However, even with these cross-University support structures for educational researchers, this continues to be a disparate group, and it is challenging to build for the future when there is a lack of understanding of who we are individually let alone collectively. This project was conducted to develop our understanding of the motivation and engagement of our educational researchers; resources and support that helped them; perceptions they have of their current research skills and those they would like to develop further; and support that they would value. Through sharing the results with staff within and beyond the former School of Education, there is an opportunity to recognise the foundations that are already in place and to see what is needed next for this diverse community. This study can act as a prompt for other educational researchers and their employers beyond this University to gain a better understanding of the needs of this disparate group.

One of the authors is Research Lead in Teacher Education and is active in developing the educational research environment. She is a Principal Lecturer and identifies as a research-active teacher educator. She successfully bid for funding to organise a writing day for staff at the former School of Education. Positive feedback from the writing day provoked a desire to investigate educational researchers' development and she led the research design and conducted the data collection and analysis. She developed a wider interest in research development – chairing institution-wide groups and influencing institutional policy. The other author has had a long engagement in supporting HE researchers through her institutional work, at this University and at other institutions and externally. She identifies as a higher education researcher, and at the time of writing was a Reader. During the preparation of this piece, we were located within the former School of Education, were active in the Network and co-chaired a group focussed on research engagement within our School. We worked together on developing our understanding of the findings and their meanings in our context and beyond.

Approach to the study

A case-study approach was used to conduct this exploratory study (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007), where the case is about the development of educational researchers within a post-92 UK University. The research questions were:

What motivates and engages these educational researchers?

What resources did they find supportive?

What further resources and/or support would they value?

The participants self-identified as educational researchers employed at the University across several Schools. Ethical approval (EDU/SF/UH/04193) was obtained for this study from the Social Science, Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority, University of Hertfordshire.

The questions were created from the metaphor of *Building for the Future*. First, exploring the foundations that are already in place from past and present research, then considering the additional foundation blocks that the educational researchers felt that they needed for the future. These might include skills they felt they needed to develop and the tools, affordances, and agencies that they required for doing the building (see Table 1).

The questions were sent to contacts on the emailing lists of the Network of educational researchers and School of Education academics. Data were collected at the School of Education conference (20) and a Network meeting (12), using anonymous post-it notes stuck to posters, one headed with each question. The posters were left in the School staff common room for a week and about 8 more individuals contributed. The exact number of participants is not known because some may have not responded to all the questions, and some may have contributed more than one answer to a question. Extra responses were collected directly by email. Most active educational researchers in the School (16) are on the Network mailing list which has 93 members. There are five additional researchers in the School making possible 98 respondents of which about a third engaged in the research.

The total number of responses to each question is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of responses to the questions.

Question	No. of responses
1. Thinking about any educational research that you have been involved in	
a. Why did you do it? What was your motivation?	25
b. What did you enjoy about doing it?	23
c. What resources and support helped you?	23
2. Thinking about any educational research that you are engaged in, or might be in the future	
a. What do you think your strongest research skills are?	19
b. Are there any research skills you would like to develop further?	24
c. Are there any resources and support that you would value?	19

Post-it notes were collected and comments collated together with the three received directly by email. Some identifiers were deleted, and minimal editing was carried out, if considered appropriate. Individual participant's contributions on post-it notes were subdivided where comments were not interlinked. The data was thematically analysed in data sets that corresponded to the questions. After careful and repeated reading, themes were established where there was some commonality between the comments (Braun and Clarke 2006). The data from questions 2b and 2c were themed together as one data set. All the data in a data set were included within at least one of the themes identified for that data set, thus avoiding the challenge of any data being ignored because it did not fit any of the themes. This means that for some themes, there was only one comment. The themes that were initially identified were reviewed again and some themes were combined because of their similarity, e.g. personal interest and passion; making a difference and having an impact. The number

of comments may not indicate the importance of the theme to the participants. In the presentation of findings, the two overarching themes of motivation and support are discussed.

Findings

Motivation

The main motivation for engaging in research, cited by the participants, was the link between the research and their practice. One respondent said

I did it both because I was paid to, and I thought it was useful/significant. The two could not be separated which has been true of all my involvement in other research projects.

There are links between research and understanding the *what?* of teaching, i.e. to develop subject knowledge and understanding related to the teaching specialism. Comments included a desire to be: 'Engaging with new thinking/ways of working. Developing professional subject knowledge' and questioning: 'In school – how can I do this better?'. This could reflect the value placed on practice-based research, and the need to closely integrate research and practice to remain at the forefront of practice (La Velle and Kendall 2019). van Winkel et al. (2018) looked at the motives that prompted later-career research-active academics in a new Dutch university to conduct research. Participants in their research also indicated that they were motivated by subject-related curiosity and were orientated towards the development of new ideas and methods.

There are also links between research and understanding the *how?* of teaching, i.e. to develop pedagogical approaches including supporting students' research and developing learning tools for colleagues and students. The complexity of negotiating the workload of a teaching and research contract may be a driver towards research being integrated closely with the *what? or how?* of their practice, for most participants. Many of the educational researchers have come from a practice background, rather than a research background. This has meant that where their teaching involves supporting students to carry out research, they are at the edge of their own knowledge and experience. Several participants cited a desire to understand how to conduct research, implicit in this is the need to further enhance their understandings of the mechanisms of research to be able to better support student research, and the need to lead by modelling good practice through developing their own research skills. Examples of participants' comments include to 'develop my research skills in the field of education'; 'support/develop educational research in another School'; 'support students in Year 1 with research'. The desire to be a good role model for students was also cited by van Winkel et al. (2018) as a motivating factor, as well as the need to enhance understanding of the challenges and pitfalls in students' research projects, to improve supervisory skills.

A further reason for engaging in educational research was the promotion of a research culture within the teaching community: '... to promote a research and SoTL culture in the ... community'. In a similar way, Lucas (2007) demonstrated that a community of practice can develop which relies on close linkage of research and teaching work.

Interest, passion and curiosity were listed as motivators for educational research for 11 participants. Some stated that their motivation is also linked to their engagement in higher degrees, such as a Master's or Doctoral degree, or the desire for intellectual challenge, for example: 'to complete MA'; 'had really enjoyed Master's research so very keen to do more'; 'getting my doctorate and being curious about a subject I teach' and 'personal quest and intellectual challenge'. Lucas (2007) also recognised that developing an educational researcher identity often began with the pursuit of a Master's degree.

Seven comments related to the desire for the participants' research to have an impact and make a difference to practice – either personally or more altruistically, for example, to 'change thinking and practice – to make a difference'. A smaller number stated their motivation is linked to their development, raising their academic profile and desiring to develop research skills and ways of

working. These might correlate with the 'continuous learner' identity described by van Winkel et al. (2018) and reflect a 'career' disposition. The research-active academics in the study of van Winkel et al. (2018) (working in other disciplines as well as education) were motivated to conduct research to become more competent; some preferred temporary research activities to enhance their teaching, and others wanted the new challenge of developing as a researcher having become familiar with teaching. These academics also placed value on contributing to knowledge and having publications accepted, two aspects that were not raised by the educational researchers in our study.

Other motivations included positive previous engagement with research; an invitation to become involved by a colleague; opportunities to present at conferences and travel; and fun.

Understanding the motivations for engagement in educational research can inform the framing of future joint research projects to involve new/more staff in research and to sustain the involvement of those already research active. There was a diverse range of motivators revealed in the data, with some researchers citing several different motivating factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsic motivators included enabling staff to access research degrees, whilst intrinsic motivators included interest, passion and curiosity. These more subtle factors may be influenced by the research culture within the university and in the local setting of participants, which will vary from school to school. The support and challenge which individuals receive from others within the organisation and the perceived culture of that organisation seem to be influential for those becoming research engaged, as White et al. (2014) showed in relation to teacher educators.

There is an overlap between enjoyment and motivating factors. The main enjoyable aspect of carrying out research identified by participants was gathering participants' voices and collecting data. This gives the researchers the opportunity to interact with the participants and hear their experiences and opinions, for example 'I enjoyed hearing a range of views especially the unexpected'; 'I love receiving the answers/responses. It is exciting as well as enjoyable' and 'using collage as a data collection method'.

Eight participants recognised that they enjoyed the intellectual challenge involved in thinking, reflecting and gaining new insights: 'discovering new ideas; expanding, making connections'; 'reading for (and) theorising'; 'loved the intellectual challenge' and 'gaining new insights. Stretching my own mental ability'. There was an enjoyment of being able to go beyond 'just teaching'.

Other aspects of researching that were enjoyed by several participants included: learning new skills; literature reviewing; working with students as researchers; the sense of achievement and producing a valuable output; and collaborating with colleagues. There were individual comments relating to enjoying reflecting on own practice, writing up, presenting, mentoring and having a mentor. The latter might be linked to mentoring, providing a positive role-model for the development of a researcher identity (Griffiths, Thompson, and Hryniewicz 2010).

Support

Time and funding

Five participants felt that dedicated time in the workload allocation model of the institution was particularly helpful. However, dedicated time for research was also often desired by the participants, which may indicate that not all participants were able to access or utilise dedicated time. Griffiths, Thompson, and Hryniewicz (2010) also found a desire for dedicated research time among teacher educators, where a lack of time due to a heavy teaching load was a barrier to developing a research identity. Having funding and deadlines to work to was also valued.

Resources

The library, books and librarians were referred to by seven participants as beneficial, with such comments as 'Fabulous [library] team. Access to so many books and journals'. Training and teaching were valued, from CPD and post-graduate research degree sessions. Participants also recognised a number of research activities where they wanted to access further training. Mentors, tutors and

knowledgeable others were appreciated. Practical mentoring was also desired by some participants. This desire to work alongside experienced colleagues as mentors has been recognised elsewhere as powerful research support in developing a research profile (Griffiths, Thompson, and Hryniewicz 2010). Such an apprenticeship model with an adept and an apprentice (Lave and Wenger 1991) is one of the ways that research mentoring is conducted in the School within this case study institution (White and Dickerson 2020).

Peers and collaboration

The predominant source of support cited is colleagues, others who are engaged in research and fellow [post-graduate research] students, and the opportunity to discuss research with these people, for example 'working with supportive colleagues'; 'peer conversations are always very helpful' and 'people to discuss knots with you'. The open culture was appreciated. These findings align with those of others, where providing opportunities for researchers to get together to become a local community of practice has been cited as key to educational researcher development (Lucas 2007; White et al. 2014).

Several participants commented that being in a Special Interest Group or a research team with experienced researchers was a good learning experience. This is captured in this comment:

Fantastic support from other members of research team. Very helpful to work alongside experienced researchers and to feel part of a project and to see how they approached research.

Some participants identified collaborative research projects and the research community as areas for development. The importance of working with mentors through shared project work was identified by Hulme and Sangster (2013), who looked at emerging researchers in teacher educator roles. In contrast to formal training opportunities that were unconnected with immediate research needs, 'professional learning was regarded to be most effective when it was situated, local and sustained and arose from immersion in task-focused, local micro-communities of inquiry', with informal rather than formal mentorship deemed more timely and effective (Hulme and Sangster 2013, 187).

Research skills

The participants recognised in themselves a large range of different strengths in their research skills – at all stages of the research process, including having completed a research degree. These strengths indicate areas of support that may be made available for future educational researchers through formal and informal mentoring. The most common areas identified as strong were analysing and theorising. Comments include: 'drawing conclusions on the basis of the evidence analysis' and 'conceptualising and developing models/visual presentations'. This perhaps reflects a recent focus within the School to enhance the quality of educational research through increased theorisation.

Other strengths mentioned include networking, being relational, synthesising and developing ideas, creative thinking, criticality, ethics, writing and presenting. Aspects of data collection such as interviewing and focus groups, and developing questions were recognised by some as strong skills. These strengths reflect a range of areas where colleagues could, potentially, provide mentoring and training. There are similarities between the areas perceived as strengths and the aspects of research which participants enjoy, especially data collection.

The main area participants cited for further development is data analysis skills, especially using technology to help with statistics and coding, for example: 'interviewing, coding, use of technology to help with coding, analysis and transcription'; 'understanding statistics (basic)' and 'developing my understanding of collage as a data collection method and how to analyse the data further'. The last comment chimes with a thread in the responses that suggests a desire to develop more creative data collection methods and analysis. Developing writing also features in the comments of five participants.

There is an expressed desire for general further development, to build on Master's research skills and 'training for beginner researchers. A small group of support for beginners'.

Some specific aspects are mentioned, for example, 'I am always keen to learn more about language and multiliteracies'; 'critical discourse analysis, ethnography' and 'ICT support'. There may also be a need to help staff make links with others who share their interests, for example:

I would value being put in touch with anyone interested in researching language in learning and the possibility of forming small interest groups defined around a certain question or issue.

With strong foundational skills revealed in this study overlapping with some of the desired support, the challenge will be to provide the space and time to enable researchers to 'find' each other informally. Although there may be an 'informal collaborative and supportive culture within the school' (White et al. 2014, 12), it is more complex to extend this culture across an institution.

Concluding remarks and implications

The following implications are drawn from the experience in this University and offer points for any university to consider when building a resilient educational researcher community. We focus specifically on community building – how we can build and what the challenges are, concluding with implications for further research.

Community building for the future – developing a culture of research and scholarly practice

This research project has contributed to a better understanding of ourselves, self-identifying educational researchers, individually and collectively. It has given a snapshot of some motivational factors and aspects of research that were enjoyed and identifying affordances. The community share a strong foundation of research skills. However, building an educational research community for future collaborative research projects has been challenging. Below are points to support further development of educational research communities, drawn from this case study, and shared for others to reflect on in light of their own institutional contexts.

How can we build for the future?

By recognising the skills among these educational researchers and understanding more about their development needs and their hopes and vision for their research, the findings can inform provision and communication of available resources and opportunities for educational researcher development in this institution. The findings suggest that at this University there is a need for signposting more generic researcher development, including qualitative and quantitative data analysis and developing writing skills provided within the institutional development programme for researchers. As the research has been carried out at practitioner level, by peers, the results provide different insights to those collected by national surveys such as the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey (CEDARS) and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), which focus on the wider researcher community. This indicates that exploring the specific needs of educational researchers compared to the generic needs of researchers can provoke a discourse for better understanding of the needs of researchers in this discipline.

It might be possible for educational researchers to associate together within the Network and to find a group of like-minded researchers in a similar niche area. However, given the diversity of interests within this group, there may be a need to look externally, suggesting the importance of enabling educational researchers access to events where they can network with others beyond their institution, to find others who share their research interests. Such an approach can open collaborative opportunities and enhance educational research capacity (Fowler et al. 2009). In this case, these findings indicate that it is important for researcher mentors and developers to appreciate the limitations of trying to provide for the needs of all educational researchers internally.

What are the challenges?

Groups of educational researchers are small and often niche, and individual researchers might work in isolation and outside of Schools of Education. In this institution these factors challenge our ability to build a community of educational researchers and our capacity to provide for their development effectively. Educational researchers found in other centres across universities come from different perspectives, with different understandings of educational research, so collaboration can be very productive. Whilst this could provide an expansive environment for research, it can also be linked to misunderstandings and a lack of recognition of the broad range that the term 'educational research' embraces. This can be amplified by a lack of understanding of the differences between SoTL and educational research. Those involved in SoTL, focussing on developing teaching and learning practices, often lie comfortably within the remit of learning and teaching centres and conferences whilst educational research is much broader but can be seen as 'about teaching' to those in research and 'about research' for those in teaching and learning centres, and therefore can fall between provision. Finding ways to evidence the impact of SoTL to support applications for reward, recognition and promotion can also be challenging (see, e.g. Boshier 2009; Canning and Masika 2022).

The participants in this research all self-identified as educational researchers, but there are other members of staff who do not recognise themselves as researchers, including some teacher educators who enter University after working as teachers in school or those who have joined from other professional roles outside academia. Coryell et al. (2013) found that adults learning to become educational researchers from a variety of backgrounds were uncertain about their role in research, their ability as researchers, how to become a researcher, and how to discern the legitimacy of their research. Griffiths, Thompson, and Hryniewicz (2010) suggest that it is hard for teacher educators to develop research identities because in newer universities staff feel that teaching is valued more highly than research, and that practitioner research is not as valued as other forms of research, and because they bring a strong teacher identity with them (Murray and Male 2005). Hulme and Sangster (2013, 184) note that 'teacher educators rarely benefit from the postdoctoral phase of socialisation into academia, which traditionally provides an apprenticeship for research careers'. By building a community of educational researchers that are more aware of their individual and collective identity, and have space to connect with each other, it may be possible to raise the profile of educational researchers and support others to join the community and develop their identity as educational researchers, including teacher educators. The involvement of researchers that have come from other careers is in line with the increase in 'pracademics' across universities, and the challenges that this has for their professional identities during transition into academia (Dickinson, Fowler, and Griffiths 2022). The increase in distance working following the COVID-19 pandemic is a further challenge to informal collaboration and providing a supportive culture. However, the increase in distance working can also enable more engagement for colleagues who are dispersed, for example, visiting researchers, if there is appropriate dissemination of opportunities.

The Network of educational researchers in this institution was established to support sustainability and build capacity in educational research, to provide for a Unit of Assessment in the REF. The group of educational researchers is in constant turn over and interests develop and change, therefore the conversation started here needs to be ongoing, to continually surface needs and skills within the community and to provide appropriate development opportunities. The Network serves other purposes apart from those linked to the REF. The findings indicate a need to link people with specific skills to those identifying a matched need, for peer support and mentoring within the community of educational researchers. A personalised needs-led approach has emerged to address this within the School of Education (White and Dickerson 2020). The challenge here is that mentoring usually lies within Schools, while educational research and expertise in this field lies in several Schools. This may be less of a challenge in institutions with different organisational structures. Managers need to encourage cross-university educational research and research mentoring if the outcomes and benefits of these processes are to have an impact on an institution as a whole. In this case, the Network has the potential to provide such mentoring opportunities.

This research has helped us to develop an understanding of ourselves, provoking a deeper discussion about how we can work together more effectively and surfacing a significant desire to make interdisciplinary connections at 'grass root' level on common areas of interest to develop recognised research groups, and to attract funding. Important questions for us to explore going forward will be, what are we building together? What are we developing educational researchers for? By finding a shared purpose for our Network we hope to bring coherence and to build a more resilient researcher community. A similar inquiry may benefit educational researchers within other institutions.

The Network at this institution provides a good place to bring educational researchers from across the University together and the findings of this research have been disseminated there, forming part of the discussion of who we are and what we are seeking to achieve. We hope that this small project will increase the recognition of educational researchers at this institution developing a culture of research and scholarly practice and building a resilient educational researcher community for the future. This will be a helpful lever towards supporting ongoing institutional change.

Further research

The limitation of this study arises from the small sample size and that it is a case study, reflecting a single institution, so the findings cannot be generalised, but are indicative of features of interest. Wider research into the experiences of educational researchers across post-92 universities in the UK is still needed, particularly around the development of educational researchers, including exploring who provides leadership and what that leadership looks like. The findings provide a useful framework for designing questions for a more in-depth study into the benefits and challenges of conducting educational research or for carrying out a broader quantitative study, reaching educational researchers nationally to inform educational researcher development.

Note

1. A post-92 university is a former polytechnic that was given university status in 1992 in the UK.

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