

Don't bore us, get to the 'useful answer' chorus, says ex-minister

Education scholars told to swap 'minor' research for policy-focused pursuits. Matthew Reisz reports

A former Labour education secretary has called on educational researchers to abandon their focus on "minor or introverted research interests" and to start "offering answers to the questions which pre-occupy policy-makers".

Writing in the latest issue of the *International Journal for Learning and Lesson Studies*, Charles Clarke, who served as secretary of state for education and skills in the Labour government from 2002 to 2004, writes that "the mutual respect of policy-makers and researchers is not always as great as it should be".

While most countries now accept "the need for educational success", continues Mr Clarke, who is currently visiting professor of politics at the University of East Anglia, there is still a need to investigate

a wide range of questions about how best to achieve it.

Issues of curriculum reform, teaching quality and the relationship between education and work were all areas where politicians should draw on "judgements based on real research and understanding" rather than falling back on "gut feeling".

Yet in Mr Clarke's view, "there don't seem to be many useful answers to these kinds of questions".

"It often seems, fairly or unfairly, that educational research appears to be addressing minor or introverted research interests, rather than offering answers to the questions which preoccupy policy-makers."

He says the only solution is for researchers to "initiate discussion with practitioners around the 'future of education' and 'educational

improvement' agenda, accepting that things can be changed and improved".

They also needed to be more willing "to engage in the types of controversy and polemic which characterise a field of policy in which public interest is so strong", Mr Clarke says.

The journal offered a number of academics the opportunity to respond to Mr Clarke, who was education secretary when the Labour government decided to introduce top-up tuition fees of up to £3,000 in England.

Ference Marton, an emeritus professor in the department of education at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, says that practical questions such as "Does class size matter?" or "Is individual tutoring a good idea?" simply "cannot be answered" because they are "questions about means, and there are no universal answers to questions about means".

Attempts to provide them were as pointless as trying to decide in the abstract "if pills are better than surgery" or "if a screwdriver is better than a hammer", he adds.

In his response, Paul Morris, professor of education at the University of London's Institute of Education, points out that although "extensive research" has been undertaken on many of the topics identified by Mr Clarke, it does not "provide the simple answers he seeks".

Professor Morris also challenges the idea that researchers should define "their role as providers of policy briefs" and "focus on the search for 'what works'".

This could lead them to "take for granted the prevailing structures of schooling and fail to address the underlying values and political questions about what is desirable", he says.

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