Educational Research(ers) in 2026: Epistemic and professional histories and futures

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Competing conceptions of educational research and the enduring debates that shape the field

- Historical understandings of the nature, scope, and epistemic status of educational research,
  - emergence as an academic discipline
  - evolving relationship with teaching and teacher education
- Educational research as subject to recurrent public contestation
- Being and becoming an educational researcher in 2026
- Concluding comments

Historical understandings

Background definitions

- “Research”: systematic inquiry that is subject to conscientious self-criticism and collegial critical discourse (see Stenhouse, 1981)

- “Educational”: inclusive term, covering both research about education, and research for the advancement and critical challenge of educational activities, settings, relationships and modes of scholarship

Tensional character of educational research

Aims	Academic	Professional
Epistemological affinities	Social scientific	Humanistic
Organisation	Multidisciplinary	Transdisciplinary

- (State-funded) educational provision – conflicting narratives
- Institutional arrangements for other areas of inquiry
- Internal fissures between different intellectual and professional choices
- (Lack of) integration between research and practice

Tensioned status of educational research

- **Philosophical tensions:**
  - The nature of teacher knowledge: a craft, an art, a science, or a blend
  - Education as a discipline, multi/interdisciplinary field, or site of parallel disciplinarities
- **Sociological tensions:**
  - Status and identity of the teaching profession are shaped by how teacher knowledge is socially recognised (high/low prestige), influencing research priorities and its uptake in policy and practice.
  - Status of educational researchers complexly situated within the development of academic subject structures and recognition mechanisms
- **Political tensions:**
  - Who should control and define education and the preparation of teachers e.g. the state, universities, schools, religious institutions.

- **Implications:**
  - Educational research does not occupy a unified epistemic status with simple authority but intersects with professional identities, political values, and competing knowledge traditions.

A history of epistemological struggles

- **Differentiation**: ‘foundation disciplines’ and disciplinary hegemonies, imbalanced mutual recognition
- **Maturation**: SS vs STEM, conceptions of established fields hinging on conditions of scientificity
- **Parity**: art or technology of education, vs science or scholarship of education. Imbalance in valuing poiesis & praxis/ theoria
- **Identity**: mediation theory/ practice (‘practical theory’)

Powerful discourses in education and educational research

Institutionalised and with structural power

- Structure funding regimes
- Shape formal accountability mechanisms
- Define legitimate knowledge
- Travel across governance levels

Quasi-institutionalised and/or counter-hegemonic

- Drive academic research and NGO activity
- Rarely shape core accountability architecture
- Stimulate political contestation
- Cross knowledge and practice domains

Powerful discourses in education and education research

Effectiveness & improvement	System performance & marketisation	Datafication & platformisation	Science of learning	Justice & inclusion	Wellbeing & flourishing	Critique & empowerment
• Education should be guided by scientifically validated interventions, measurable impact, and systematic knowledge synthesis. • **evidence-based practice and policy**	• Education is an engine of economic growth and should be governed through benchmarking accountability and competition. • **performance-based governance**	• Education can be optimised through data extraction, analytics, algorithmic modelling and AI systems. • **analytics and system optimization**	• Education as scientifically optimisable process through cognitive, developmental and neuroscience evidence • **social investment and communities of practice**	• Education should address structural inequality, recognition and epistemic justice. • **social investment and communities of practice**	• Education should cultivate holistic development, socio-emotional competence and flourishing. • **human flourishing**	• Education as critical consciousness, participatory democracy and transformative agency. • **critical pedagogies and pedagogies of disruption**

Institutionalised ---------- Counter-hegemonic

1 Effectiveness & improvement

Discursive threads:

1.1 Evidence-Based Education

- Hierarchies of evidence and “what works” logic
- Meta-analysis and effect sizes as authoritative evidence
- RCTs in educational research
- Systematic reviews and other research synthesis
- **1.2 Implementation & Improvement Science**
- Implementation research in education systems
- Networked improvement communities

Critiques:

- “Learnification” and narrowing of purpose (Biesta, 2010)
- Epistemic narrowing (RCT hierarchy dominance)
- Limits of causal inference in complex systems (Cartwright)

Institutional embedding:

Evidence-Based Practice infrastructure (Cochrane, 2001; Campbell Collaboration, 2000; EPPI-Centre, 2003

Clearinghouses (WWC, 2002)

Research Schools Network

Educational Endowment Foundation

Research implications:

- Systematic reviews, meta-analyses and replication studies.
- Experimental/quasi-experimental designs and pre-registration for trials
- Funding for scalable interventions and demonstrable effect sizes. Methodological debates about replication and evidence hierarchies.

2 System performance & marketisation

Discursive threads:

3.1 Human Capital & Economic Framing

- Human capital theory (Becker, 1964)
- Education as productivity investment

3.2 Global Benchmarking

- PISA as policy instrument

3.3. Deliverology (Barber)

Counter-discourses:

3.4. Performativity & Audit Culture

- Accountability regimes (Ball)

3.5. Global Reform and Policy Borrowing

- Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg)
- Policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi)

Critiques:

•Stratification and inequality (Apple, 2006)
•Teacher subjectivity under audit culture (Ball, 2016)

Institutional embedding:

- OECD- PISA
- World Bank Human Capital Project
- EEA 2023 Strategic targets
- Academies & Multi-Academy Trust policy (England)
- Education Inspection Framework

Research implications:

•large-scale, comparative assessment studies and secondary analyses
•research questions on measurable attainment and international comparability.
•policy-directed evaluation studies
•national longitudinal datasets
•cross-national policy diffusion studies.
•normative framing of education as economic/ problem

3 Datafication & platformisation

Discursive threads:

6.1 Learning Analytics

- Learning analytics field
- Predictive analytics for student success

6.2 Big Data Governance

- Datafication as governance
- **6.3 AI in Education**
- LLM
- AI and intelligent tutoring systems
- Generative AI in assessment

Critiques:

- Surveillance and platform power (Selwyn, 2019)
- Algorithmic bias and inequality reproduction

Institutional embedding:

- EU Digital Education Action Plan
- OECD PISA Media & Artificial Intelligence assessment
- JISC learning analytics programme
- funding calls for trusted AI in education and data governance
- dedicated journals and special issues
- Investment in commercial platforms and tools

Research implications:

- learning-analytics and educational data-mining
- design-based research and AI system evaluation studies (adaptive tutoring, automated feedback)
- emphasis on algorithmic fairness, explainability, and ethics.
- interdisciplinary teams

4
Science of learning

Discursive threads:

4.1. Cognitive, developmental and neuroscientific evidence
- empirically validated learning mechanisms
- learning as brain plasticity and developmental change

4.2. Lab–classroom translation and implementation
- translation of cognitive findings into instructional principles
- improvement science

4.3. Design- and data-based instructional improvement

4.4. Personalised instruction and adaptive systems
- predictive analytics and adaptive modelling
- AI and generative systems

Critiques:
- neuro-reductionism and “brain-based” overreach
- translational oversimplification (lab ≠ classroom ecology) (Bruer, 1997)
- instrumentalism and performance framing (Biesta, 2010)
- datafication and governance through optimization (Williamson, 2017)

Institutional embedding:

Education Endowment Foundation toolkit

BabyLab infrastructure

Adaptive platforms

OECD Learning Science reports

Research implications:
- Interdisciplinary, lab-based and computational research
- Experimental and quasi-experimental designs, particularly RCT
- Data intensive and analytics-driven methods incl. large trace datasets, learning analytics, AI modelling, and predictive algorithms
- Orientation toward measurable outcomes, scalability, fidelity and impact

5 Justice & inclusion

Discursive threads:

4.1 Capability & Human Development

- Capability approach (Sen, 1999; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007)
- Human development & education (Nussbaum, 2011)

4.2 Inclusive Education

- Rights-based inclusion (Slee, 2011)

4.3 Culturally Relevant & Anti-Racist Pedagogy

- Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995)
- Critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)

4.4 Decolonising Knowledge

- Decolonising higher education (Bhambra et al., 2018)
- Epistemic justice (Fricker)

4.5 Reparative justice

- Reparative futures of education (Sriprakash

Critiques:

- Institutional non-performativity (Ahmed, 2012)
- Tension between equity and accountability (Ball, 2016)

Institutional embedding:

- UNESCO SDGs
- L'éducation prioritaire (France)
- Pupil Premium (England)
- Decolonisation initiatives
- Erasmus + Inclusion and Diversity priority

Research implications:

- Mixed-methods and qualitative work examining context, power, voice
- Focus on inclusive pedagogy, special educational needs, capability approaches.
- Critical scholarship on curriculum, epistemic injustice, decolonial theory.
- Funding streams and special calls for equity-targeted interventions and evaluations.
- Critical reflection on research practices and structures

6 Wellbeing & flourishing

Discursive threads:

5.1 Social and Emotional Learning

- Meta-analysis of SEL outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011)

5.2 Positive Education & Flourishing

- Positive education (Seligman et al., 2009)
- Capability-based flourishing (Nussbaum, 2011)

5.3 Therapeutic & Trauma-Informed Schooling

- Trauma-informed pedagogy (Carello & Butler, 2015)

Critiques

•Psychologisation of structural problems (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009)

•Therapeutic culture critique (Furedi, 2004)

Institutional embedding:

Whole-school wellbeing approaches

School mental health promotion

Curriculum/ transversal competencies for wellbeing (e.g. FInland)

Research implications:

- Meta-analyses of SEL effectiveness
- Debates and research on cultural validity, measurement, and psychologisation
- Interdisciplinary collaborations
- Implementation research for school mental health provision and trauma-informed practice.

7 Critique & empowerment

Discursive threads:

5.1 Critical Pedagogy

- Education as practice of freedom (Freire, 1970)
- Teachers as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988)

5.2 Participatory & Practitioner Research

- Participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005)

5.3 Civic & Democratic Education

- Democratic citizenship education

Critiques

- Co-option of radical discourse (Ahmed, 2012)
- Political backlash and policy contestation

Institutional embedding:

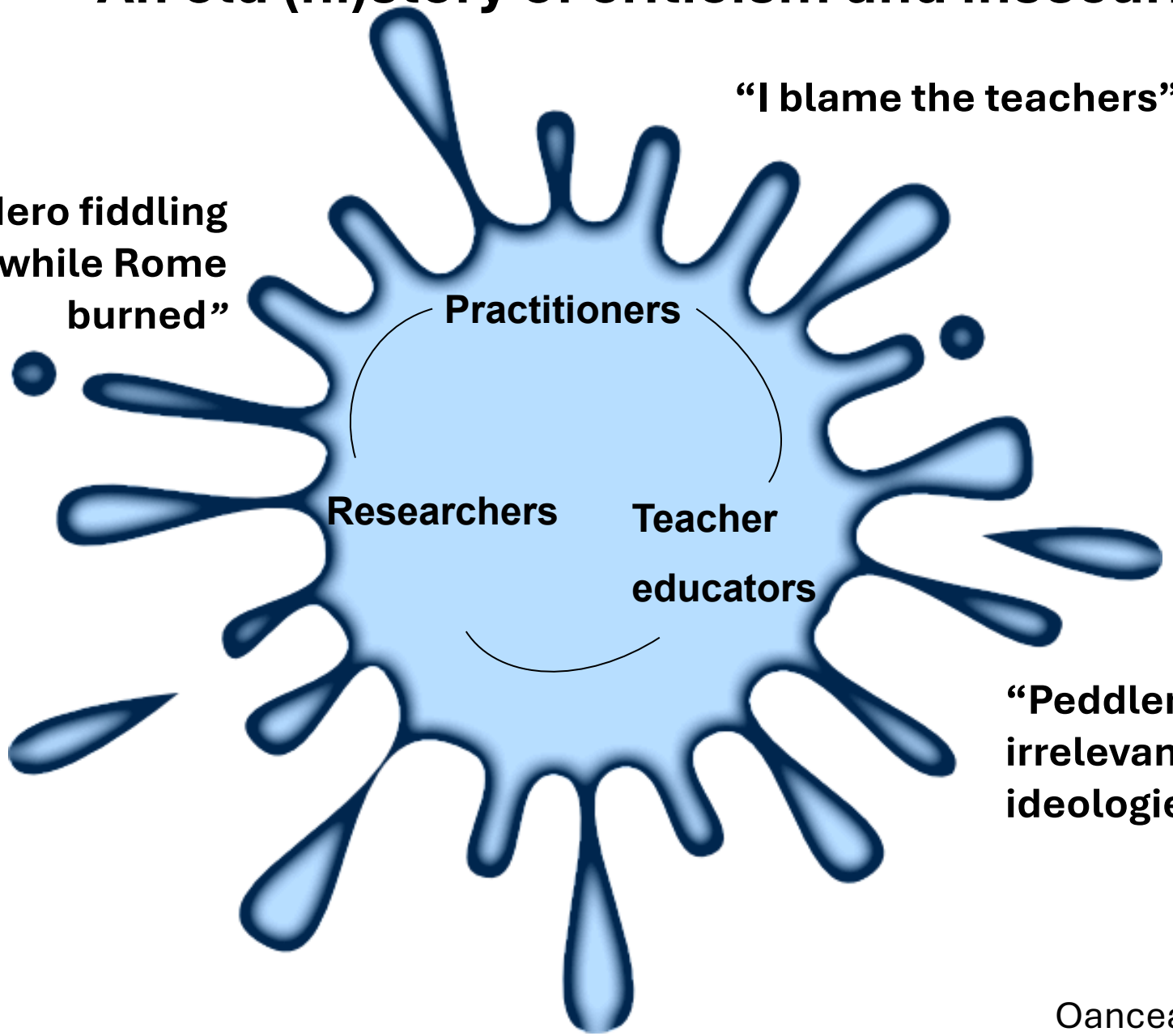
- UNESCO SDGs
- Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education
- Collaborative action research networks
- Co-creation and living labs
- Youth participation and youth voice programmes (e.g. UNESCO)

Research implications:

- Practitioner-research, participatory action research, community-led research, citizen inquiry
- Critical research
- Qualitative and normative scholarship
- Political debate of research topics
- Case studies on policy response
- Studies on youth activism, climate pedagogy and civic engagement
- Critical reflection on research hegemonies

Contestation

An old (hi)story of criticism and insecurity



Oancea, 2005, 2014

“‘If research is any good it confirms what I already know and therefore don’t need to be told again. If it doesn’t confirm what I already know it is probably no good” (respondent cited in Hargreaves, 1998, p.122)

“I used to try and read these [academic] journals. Life is too short. There is too much to do in the real world with real teachers in real schools to worry about methodological quarrels or to waste time decoding unintelligible, jargon-ridden prose to reach (if one is lucky) a conclusion that is often so transparently partisan as to be worthless” (Woodhead, 1998, p.51)

“What is the point of research which becomes narrower and narrower, with small groups of people responding to each other’s writing in esoteric journals, read only by themselves and relevant only to themselves?” (Blunkett, 2000a, p.15)

“We know what constitutes good teaching and we know what needs to be done [...] Why, then, is so much time and energy wasted in research that complicates what ought to be straightforward[...]? ... The challenge now is to expose the emptiness of education theorising that obfuscates the classroom realities that really matter” (OFSTED, 2000, p.21).

Research is in the doghouse, again. Partisan, dross, waste of money - choose your headline. (S. Hegarty, *The Guardian*, 28 July 1998)

Irrelevant, impenetrable and 'read by only the most masochistic of teachers‘ (Ch. Woodhead, *The Times*, 26 Feb 1999)

There are still many educationists who persist in endorsing or turning a blind eye to the poison still coursing through their professional bloodstream (M. Phillips, *Observer,* 1 June 1997)

Educational research is in uproar. If you think schoolteachers are beleaguered, try talking to professors of education. The paranoia drips off the walls (D. Walker, *The Independent*, 16 Oct 1997)

A concerted attack on the education research community as a whole (E. Buie, *The Herald – Glasgow*, 25 March 2000)

Critical discourses about educational research

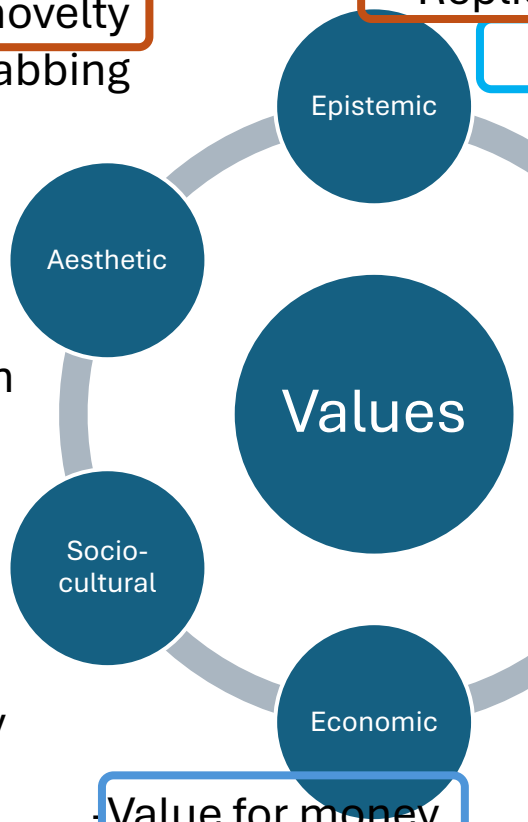
- methodological, political, and normative fault lines that underpin disagreements about quality, impact, relevance, and authority
- narratives advanced to reframe the field's purpose and legitimacy

Disputed futures

- what works– relevance to practice and policy
- concentrated funding, central control
- centers of excellence
- national educational research coordinating body
- evidence-based policy and practice
- set standards and criteria of good research
- systematic reviews and user reviews
- better dissemination
- large-scale and longitudinal studies
- rigor and scientificity
- impartiality and objectivity
- strategic coherence
- accountability for value for money

- expansive conceptions of education and research
- distributed and contextualised autonomy
- plural and networked research communities
- distributed and participatory academic debate
- ethically grounded, purpose-driven inquiry
- epistemic openness and methodological pluralism
- critical and context-sensitive knowledge building
- responsible engagement
- methodological diversity across scales and time
- reflective rigor grounded in practical judgment
- independent and publicly responsible scholarship
- democratic and trust-based governance
- reflective accountability

Fast forward to 2026



-Interdisciplinarity
-Systematic
-Accumulation
-Replicability
-Rigor

-Originality/ novelty
-Attention-grabbing
-Convincing
-Significance

-Balance of benefit
-Openness and transparency
-Integrity
-Equity
-Environmentalism

-Diversity and inclusion
-Democracy
-Collaboration
-Internationalism
-Empowerment
-Autonomy and trust
-Security and solidarity

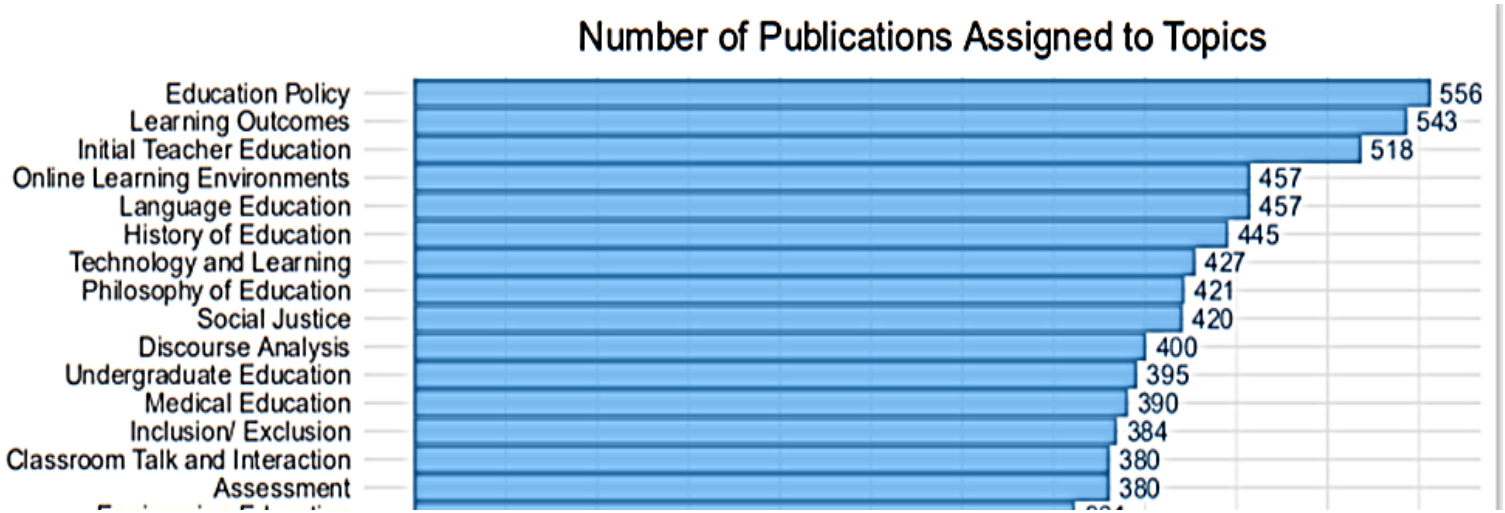
-Effectiveness
-Communicability
-Sustainability
-Trusted/ secure
-Feasibility
-'What works'/ relevance
-Professionalism

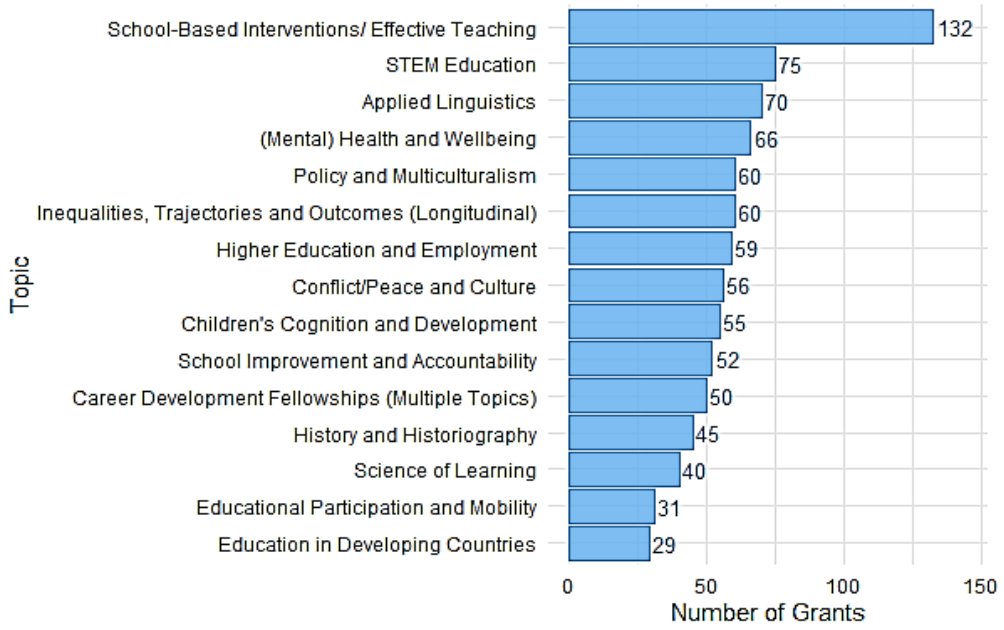
-Value for money
-Economic returns
-Auditability and accountability
-Competitiveness/ free market
-National prosperity

Challenges

- **Competing expectations**
  - methodological, political, and normative fault lines
  - diverging narratives advanced to reframe the field's purpose and legitimacy
- **Ongoing contestation**
  - fragility and destabilisation
  - uncertainty and fragmentation //
  - sites of epistemic clarification and value articulation
  - condition of the field's intellectual development.
- **Intellectual plurality and multiple forms of expertise**
  - complex (inter/trans/multi)disciplinarities
  - Integration of praxis, techne and episteme
  - Different professional jurisdictions
- **Layered accountability and public responsibility**
  - Institutional and sectoral constraints
  - Professional ethos

Being and becoming an educational researcher





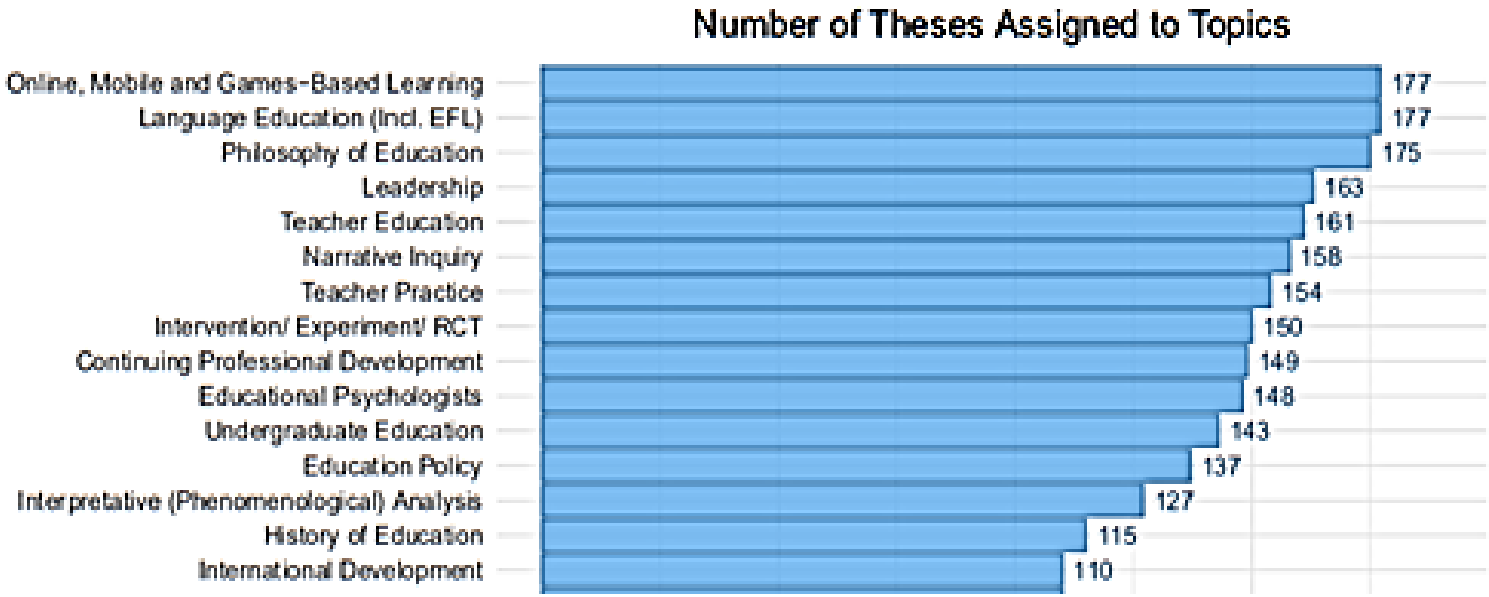
Research Topics 2010-2020 (UK)

19583 articles

995 research grants (£407m)

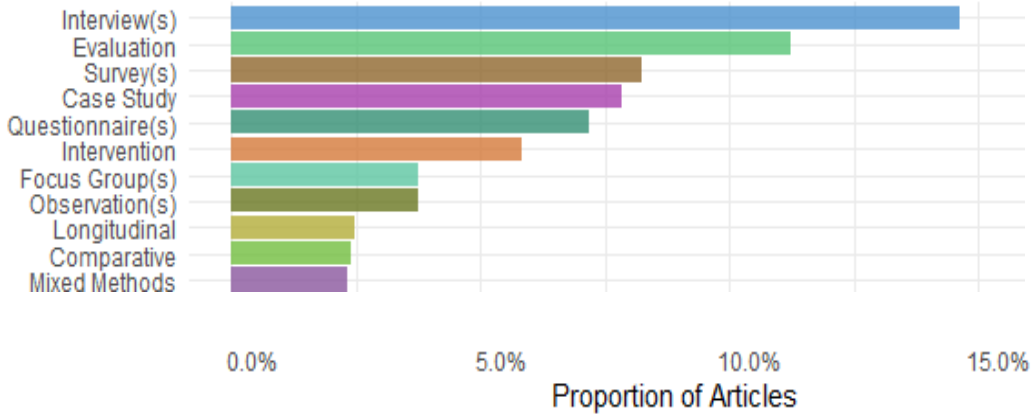
6593 doctoral theses

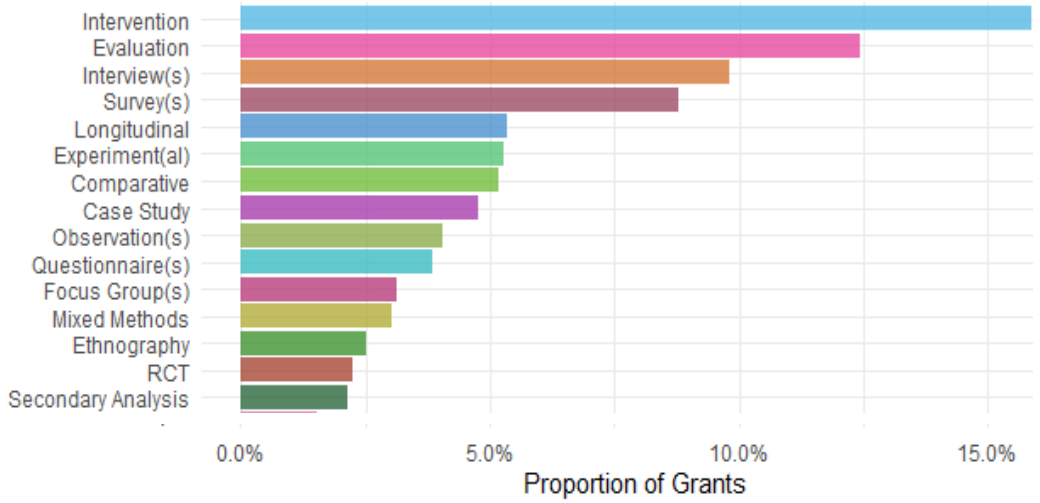
Oancea et al, 2020

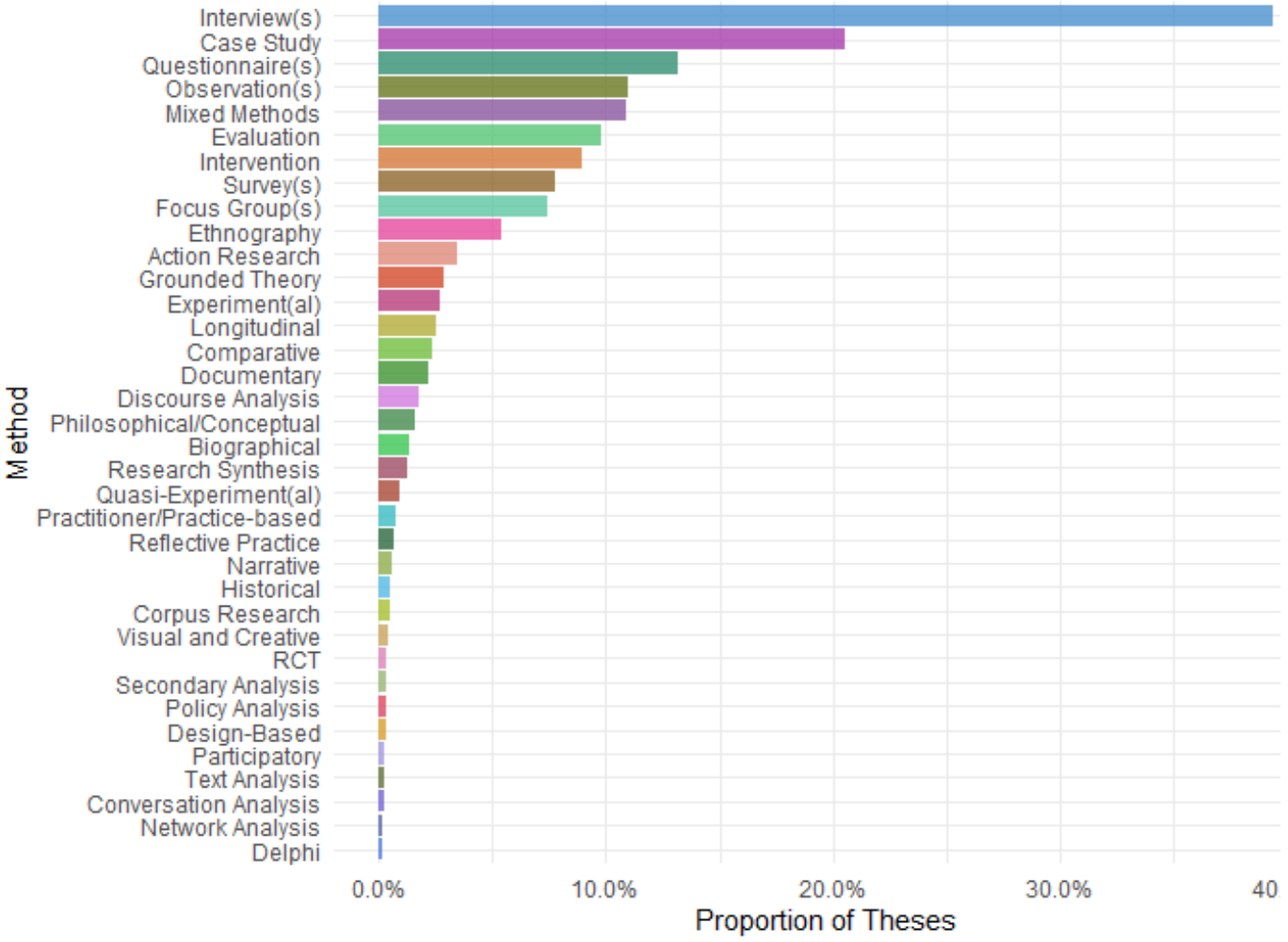


Methods

Oancea et al, 2020







What does it mean to you to be an education researcher?

a) To inquire into your own and others' educational practice in order to enable positive change;
b) To address problems relevant to educational policy and administration;
c) To understand people's educational experiences, what shapes them and to what outcomes;
d) To contribute to a growing body of rigorous knowledge on education;
e) To challenge established educational structures, discourses and practices;
f) Something else…

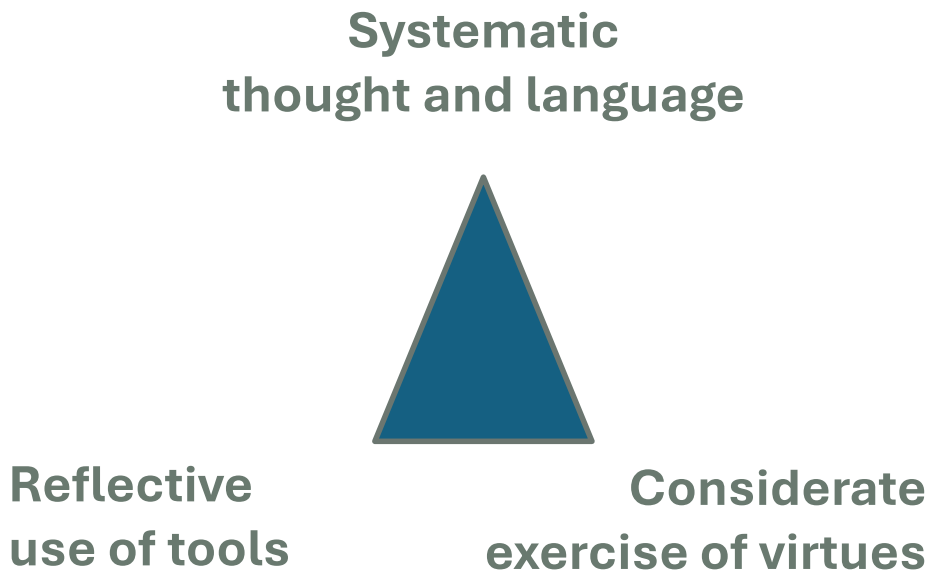
Practices of inquiry

Systematic flexing of inquisitive thought

- asking (questions) and seeking answers (quest)
- systematic process
- shared norms and standards of quality – self-criticism, formative community scrutiny
- hospitable towards educative purposes

Reflective use of tools

- procedural reasonableness, trustworthiness and rigour
- methodological theorising
- Induction – training, immersion, intelligent apprenticeship



Considerate exercise of virtues

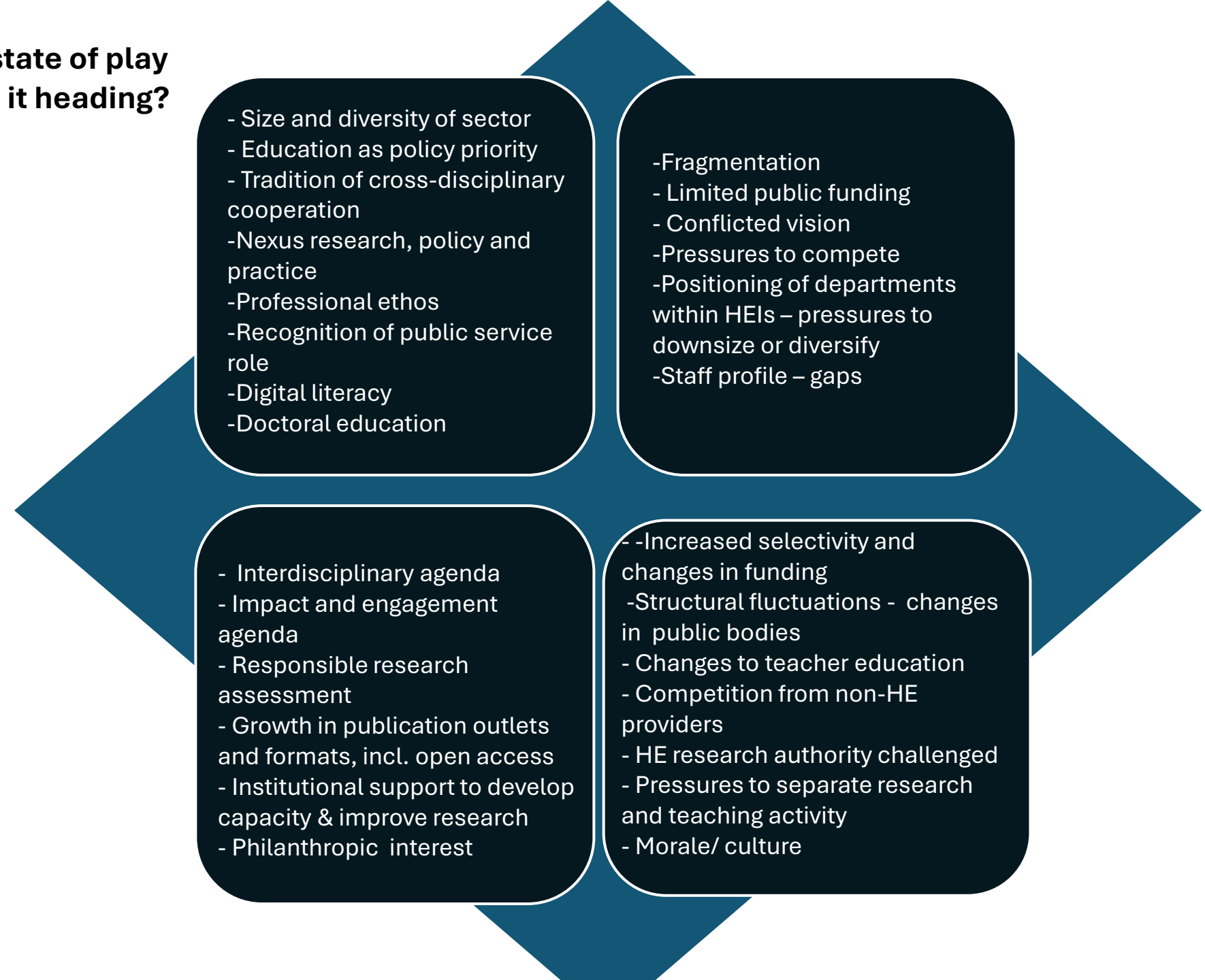
- epistemic and ethical virtues, deliberative and conversational
- interpretative normative practices grounded culturally, historically and politically
- considerate of other practices & their norms of educative-ness across communities

Back to definitions…

Educational research practice as an array of activities which combine the systematic flexing of inquisitive thought, the reflective use of tools, and the considerate exercise of virtues.

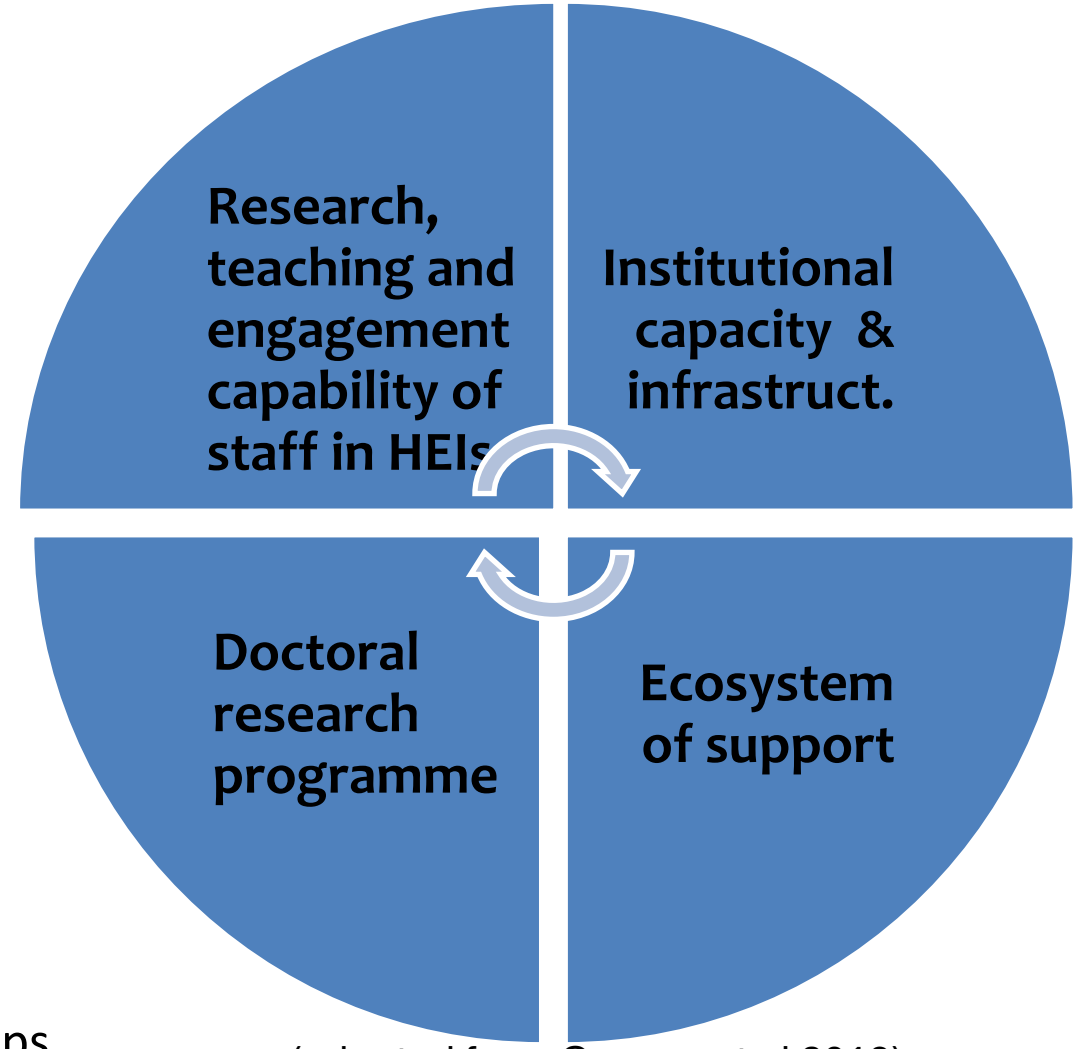

Looking to the future

What is the state of play and where is it heading?



How can doctoral capacity be developed?

Coaching &mentoring
Fellowships
Writing and conference support
Project participation
Supervision training



Scholarships
Partnerships
Working environment
Exchange and mobility
Internal funding schemes
Access to infrastructure
Clear and proportionate procedures

Research training
Supervision
Participation and representation
Community
Communications
Bespoke activities
Placements and internships

National and regional policy frameworks
Funding programmes for doctoral education
Data infrastructure
Employer engagement

(adapted from Oancea et al 2018)

Thank you!