



**CATHOLIC
EDUCATION
MELBOURNE**

Understanding School Engagement in Research (USER) Project

High-level findings, 2017

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USER Project:

Purpose, rationale and approach

The *Understanding School Engagement in Research* (USER) project aimed to help Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM) better understand and meet the needs of schools in regard to their:

1. engagement in research projects (Part 1)
2. engagement with research findings and evidence (Part 2).

Rationale

Schooling jurisdictions receive hundreds of applications per year from external researchers wishing to conduct research in schools. School feedback through the USER project has enabled CEM (and other jurisdictions) to better understand what schools want and need in regard to research, and make more informed decisions that maximise the benefit of school engagement in research, and potentially improve outcomes across CEM.

The intention of the project was to conduct a high level, broad inquiry across the system to gain an initial picture of *school* engagement in research. Further research may be conducted in the future to explore some issues more deeply, including *practitioner* engagement in, and with research.

Phased approach

Phase 1: School feedback (Aug-Sept 2016)

- Survey, focus groups, school visits (principal interviews).

Throughout phase 1, CEM gained valuable feedback from 73 participants within 67 schools (approximately 25% of CEM schools).

Phase 2: Further feedback (Sept 2016-Mar 2017)

- Present interim findings to CEM Research Committee, CEM staff and universities to gain further feedback.
- Prepare final report and recommendations.
- Share findings with CEM, schools and universities.

Phase 3: Implement recommendations (2017 and beyond)

- Update CEM *Research in Schools* policy & guidelines.
- Develop CEM research priorities.
- Strengthen partnerships and conduct further research.

USER Findings

Part 1: Engagement in research projects

How much are schools engaging in research projects?

- 79% schools receive 5 or more research requests per year.
- 47% schools receive 10 or more research requests per year. **BUT...**
- 80% schools only say 'yes' to 2 or less research requests per year.
- 55% schools say 'yes' to only one or no research requests per year.
- In 2015-16 about a quarter (23%) of respondents/schools did **not** agree to participate in **any** research projects.
- **On average, schools say 'yes' to 1 in 5 research requests per year (21%).**

Reasons for saying 'YES' to engaging in research projects

Three most commonly reported reasons for saying YES:

1. Identified as an area of need in school improvement plan (87.5%).
2. Topic is of interest to staff, students, and/or families (78.6%).
3. Outcomes - believe research will produce tangible outcomes (76.8%).

Number 1 reason for saying YES: Identified as an area of need in school improvement plan.

Reasons for saying 'NO' to engaging in research projects

Three most commonly reported reasons for saying NO:

1. Demand on school is too great, i.e. time, effort and coordination (92.9%).
2. Timing not right - school has other priorities/research underway (92.9%).
3. Need? Topic or research question is NOT related to school needs (85.7%).

Number 1 reason for saying NO: Demand on school is too great, i.e. time, effort and coordination required.

What else influences a school's decision to engage in research?

- Immediacy of outcomes (i.e. when will schools receive the findings?).
- Tangible benefits (e.g. careers session for students, staff development).
- Researchers understanding of the school context and impact on schools.
- If the school is going to receive school-specific feedback.
- If communications to schools are clear and concise with *what is required* and *time demand* front and centre.



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Part 1: Engagement in research projects

What makes a 'good' or worthwhile research project?

- Alignment with school priorities and school improvement plan.
- Aims to improve student learning, or at least a line of sight to this.
- Research results and feedback is provided to the school, and in a way that schools can use in practice.
- Aims to improve teacher capability and effectiveness.

What contributes to a 'not-so-good' research project?

- Too much time and/or demand on school.
- Research topic is not relevant to school priorities, or even education.
- There are implementation issues, i.e. research is poorly conducted.
- School does not receive any feedback or research findings.

Research topics schools are interested in:

Varied responses, but the most commonly reported themes: 1. parent engagement; 2. literacy; 3. mathematics; and 4. social & emotional learning.

Research questions pertinent to schools:

Varied responses, but the most commonly reported questions focused on improving student engagement and motivation in learning. Other themes included parent engagement, feedback, mathematics and literacy.

Examples:

How can we improve student engagement in their learning?

How can we assist parents to engage in their child's learning?

For research projects that had a positive impact on schools:

- Schools reported a mixed-methods approach, with an emphasis on capacity building (i.e. the research project included a professional learning component for staff).
- Perceived and measurable impacts reported by respondents focused on improved student learning and teacher capability.



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Part 2: Engagement with research and evidence

Do schools value research and evidence AND use it in practice?

- 80% schools 'highly value' keeping up-to-date with educational research and evidence... **BUT** only 34% 'often' use it in practice.
- 55% schools 'sometimes' use educational research and evidence in practice.
- **More schools value research and evidence, than use it in practice.**

Why do schools value research and evidence?

- Schools report it provides a solid foundation for school improvement planning, decision making and future change.
- It has the potential to strengthen teacher effectiveness and improve student learning, and it can challenge traditionally held and popular views.

How do schools use research and evidence in practice?

When interacting with their colleagues in school planning; when taking on new programs (is it evidence-based?); in professional learning (e.g. Professional Learning Teams); to frame questions and coaching conversations; and when trialling new strategies in the classroom.

Enablers to engaging with research findings and evidence:

- If it is school-specific feedback/evidence (i.e. relevant to the school).
- If research/evidence is presented in an accessible and user-friendly format (e.g. already analysed and visually engaging).
- If research is promoted and supported by leadership and part of staff meetings, planning and professional learning.
- If there is system (CEM) support for the research or evidence.
- Whether it is part of the school culture and built into day-to-day planning, dialogue, professional learning, and learning and teaching.

Barriers to engaging with research findings and evidence:

- Teacher time, cost, motivation, physical space, timetable restrictions.
- No dedicated role in school to coordinate engagement with research.
- Confidence of teachers to translate research into classroom practice.
- Competition with other schools (i.e. it is less risky to agree with or follow 'popular' views supported by schools in the local area – e.g. class sizes, learning spaces – rather than challenge with evidence).



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Part 2: Engagement with research and evidence

Staff access to research findings and evidence

Four most commonly reported sources for research and evidence:

1. CEM publications, professional learning or events (92.9%).
2. Within the school, e.g. professional learning, from colleagues (91.1%).
3. Professional networks (91.1%).
4. Educational conferences or other professional learning activities (91.1%).

Number 1 source of research and evidence: Within the school, e.g. professional learning, from colleagues.

For research and evidence that had a positive impact on schools:

- Key messages related to pedagogy and teacher effectiveness.
- They found out about the research and evidence from CEM, their networks or through professional learning.
- Staff are engaging with the research and evidence through professional learning (often within school), and when trialling new strategies in the classroom... not usually by downloading and reading an article!

SUMMARY – What our schools told us: 10 key messages

1. Schools get a lot of requests to participate in research, but **choose very few**.
2. Schools tend to choose projects that are **CEM-led** or where CEM are partners.
3. Schools most often choose research projects that are aligned with **school priorities**.
4. Schools will more likely engage in projects that offer **tangible benefits** and outcomes for them.
5. The **demand** on schools must be reasonable, and outweighed by the benefit.
6. Schools often **do not receive feedback** from researchers or a copy of research findings.
7. Schools value research projects that have a **capacity building** component.
8. Teachers and school leaders mostly **access** research and evidence from **within their school**.
9. Teachers and school leaders mostly **engage** with research and evidence through **dialogue, interactions with their peers, and professional learning**.
10. An evidence-informed culture in schools is enabled by **supportive leadership** and a **culture** where using research and evidence is built into the dialogue and day-to-day operations of the school.



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University consultation

CEM also engaged universities in conversations about school engagement in research. We met with senior academics and research management staff from five Melbourne universities, to share CEM's approach to research and provide school feedback from the USER project.

Key messages from the university consultation:

- It was agreed that school engagement is critical to the effectiveness and impact of educational research, however it is not common practice in the conduct of all school research.
- Researchers and jurisdictions want to work together to better engage and meet the needs of schools as *partners* in research, not just *participants*.
- As a result of school feedback, universities indicated they would make changes to their research application and ethical review processes, and researcher training.
- Universities expressed a keen interest in continuing the conversation and relationship with CEM, and a desire to work with CEM as a formal partner and funder of future research projects.

- CEM indicated we will be more proactive with initiating research that is relevant to our schools, rather than mainly responding to partnering and funding requests from universities.
- Universities shared the increasing expectation on them to demonstrate value and impact of their research efforts. While we believe this is a positive step forward, we understand this is difficult and requires a significant shift in academic thinking and practice.

Quotes from university staff about the USER project:

Your research-focused department [CEM] and the USER project are impressive - I am looking forward to hearing more about the outcomes.

I was especially pleased to hear about your approach and to have some of the data from schools and principals about their needs. There are some very important lessons for researchers that we need to ensure make it onto their radar before approaching schools with underdeveloped project proposals.

I think your efforts with the USER project have been so long overdue, and it is terrific that you guys are really pulling it together.

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Recommendations

What CEM is going to do as a result of school and university feedback

1. **Share the USER project findings** within CEM, with schools and other key stakeholders with an interest in school engagement in research.
2. **Write and publish a USER journal article** to fill the gap in existing evidence, and influence thinking and practice in the broader research and education communities.
3. **Review and update our Research in Schools policy and practices** to ensure better quality research proposals are submitted and reviewed in light of school feedback, and schools have access to research opportunities of interest.
4. **Develop CEM research priorities** to guide our commissioned research investment, support the review of external research applications, and help student researchers choose research projects that are relevant to schools and CEM.

5. **Explore the possibility of a USER project Phase 2**, involving deeper analysis of school engagement in research and/or practitioner engagement in, and with research.
6. **Continue to engage universities and other jurisdictions** in our journey to better understand school engagement in research and create more formal opportunities to work in partnership for the benefit of our schools and education.

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