

Day one at the British Educational Research Association conference

Teacher training a hot topic in Edu Question Time

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Teachers and researchers quizzed top education experts during a "Question Time" event at this year's British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference.

BERA was celebrating its 40th year at the three-day event held at the Institute of Education in London.

Hundreds of researchers filled the halls over the course of the event and more than 600 research papers were presented during the course of the conference.

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Topics such as curriculum, teacher education and new technologies were among those discussed throughout the event.

The four education experts who took part in Education Question Time fielded questions from the audience on Tuesday evening on topics such as teaching unions, financial accountability at academies and challenges in the future of education.

Answering questions were Peter Mortimore,

author of 'Education Under Siege'; Sam Freedman, former adviser to Michael Gove and now director of research, evaluation and impact at Teach First; Pamela Munn, researcher and former Dean of the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh and former BERA president; and Dame Alison Peacock DBE, the headteacher of The Wroxham School and co-author of 'Creating Learning Without Limits'.

The panel was first asked whether or not teachers had any reason to be cheerful.

Mr Freedman said: "I think the next few years are going to be tricky. The biggest decision this government has is what to do about School Direct [a new government 'school-led' teacher training course]. There were 15,000 places this year-if it continues at that pace of growth there will be major transformation in teacher education."

"Some universities are joining up with School Direct much faster than others and we can see a domination of that market by a smaller number of players, which is quite positive."

"But for others it will be much tougher and there is a lot of uncertainty about which direction School Direct is going in."

Professor Munn said: "There is quite a lot of scope for improvement in partnerships between universities and schools. I would say the sector in England in being clear and convincing should say what added value it brings to the education of teachers needs not to be shy about having a well-orchestrated message to get across to politicians."

Dame Alison said: "Initially I am quite optimistic. I think teacher training which is school-based works well if it is a fine school



and colleagues are reflective and have time to work closely with teacher candidate but if it grows too quickly it could run the risk of teacher candidates going into schools without the support in place."

In response to a later question, all panellists agreed that more should be done to make sure there is a strong system in place to prevent any conflicts of interest in academy chains, on the back of a report commissioned by the education select committee which raised concerns about financial dealings at some academy chains. Although Mr Freedman said

there was already regulations in place which should stop academy chains from breaking the rules.

The final question of the day from the audience asked what three things the panel members would want to see on each of the party manifestos ahead of the upcoming general election.

Professor Munn said: "Teacher education and qualified teachers in all schools; finance and how to make sure to build on the pupil premium; and a different, and better, accountability system."



From left: Pamela Munn, Sam Freedman, Warwick Mansell, Peter Mortimore, Dame Alison Peacock

Dame Alison said: "The first thing I would say is we should no longer label children, teachers or schools; invest in professional learning; and abolish Ofsted for at least a year and put in place a meaningful and worthwhile system."

Peter Mortimore said: "I would create a commission, like the law commission, to keep an eye on things; give all schools the same money and powers so that everything and everyone is on a level playing field; and I would end league tables."

The conference also heard research which revealed that students embarking on maths A-level programmes often have an inadequate grasp of algebra.

The work, which was carried out by Nicky Rushton and Dr Frances Wilson of Cambridge Assessment, said students are poorly equipped

for A-levels.

There was also research presented from Professor Steve Strand, a former government consultant and professor of education at Oxford University, who said efforts to hold schools to account may make it harder for schools serving disadvantaged communities to recruit good teachers.

His research shows that in terms of the proportion of pupils gaining five GCSEs A*-C grades, including English and maths, the gap between those students in outstanding schools who do not qualify for free school meals (FSM) versus those who do is 25 points - with 75 per cent of non-FSM achieving the benchmark, against 50 per cent of FSM students.

Next year's conference is due to be held in Belfast.

President's Q&A

Professor Ian Menter is president of BERA and director of professional programmes at Oxford University department of education

How has the first day of the conference been?

It has been very successful. We have looked at early career research today and the future of educational research looks very promising. The presentations and keynote speakers have been very good and launching the main conference has felt very celebratory as BERA marks 40 years of existence.

We were able to present lifetime achievement awards for the first time and I think that is worth mentioning as it marks long careers and contribution to the profession.

How does it feel to be marking 40 years?

It is interesting to reflect on these past 40 years. Personally, I look back at where I was then.

I, unlike some here today, had been born by then, but I was completing my initial teacher training and I was certainly not a BERA member when it was formed

It is interesting to reflect on how many of the themes of educational research, such as pupil achievement and social justice and inequality, are still being discussed although we have a lot more understanding on those issues.



What has been the main change in the past 40 years?

I think the main change in research terms has been the growth of the professional community and even feeling that educational research is being listened to by policy makers.

They are aware of the importance of disseminating that work and getting better and better at communicating the outcomes in ways that help policy and process.

What do you think the next 40 years hold?

The feeling generated today is that collegial support is really important to ensuring there is concerted development in education research. BERA is a really important player in ensuring there is coherence in educational research.

Fellowships awards

Two academics were the recipients of an inaugural award by BERA.

The BERA John Nisbet Fellowship was named in honour of the group's first president, who died in 2012.

Paul Black, professor of science education at King's College, London, and Kathy Sylva, professor of educational psychology at the University of Oxford, were on Tuesday

appointed John Nisbet Fellows.

The fellowship will be awarded each year to people who are deemed to have made an outstanding contribution to educational research over their career.

Professor Black collected his award, and said: "It is so special to receive this on the 40th anniversary in honour of John Nisbet.

"What more can one ask for?"

