# Sydney Summit Notes

**Carly Boreland**

March 26 2019

The NSW Teachers Federation hosted the Sydney Summit over two days, March 25th to 26th 2019. This was the inaugural gathering of 22 invited academics and teacher unions, *Advancing the influence and impact of educational research in the public interest 2019-2022* that was an exploratory event whose intent is outlined in the ***Backgrounder*** (see Appendix A).

For our part, the NSW Teachers Federation’s support for this event was born of our commitment to what we argue is the essential work of unions: to push back against the neo-liberal agenda that seeks to marketise and commercialise public education in the way that has succeeded in diminishing all other aspects of public service provision in much of the English-speaking world. As the first host, our union sought to foster a genuine spirit of collaboration amongst unions, researchers and others committed to the interests of public education.

It would appear that the Sydney Summit was largely successful in achieving the aims of this initial exploratory conversation. What follows is an outline of key conclusions and next steps for the newly developed working group members to develop further.

The following represents a brief synopsis of the one and one-half day long summit The full agenda is in Appendix B.

**Monday, March 25**

**Welcome and Overview**

Maurie Mulheron (President, NSW Teachers’ Federation)offered acknowledgement of countryand introduced the event, underscoring the commitment of the NSWTF to collaboration with researchers in the face of the shared challenges unions face in advancing public education.

J-C Couture offered a brief summary of the Backgrounder document and invited participants to consider the opportunities for teacher organizations and researchers alike to work outside their system boundaries given global shifts in the areas of artificial intelligence, large-scale assessments and our increasingly brittle democratic institutions.

**Plenary Presentation: Recent and Future Directions in Global Education Reform Movements**

Pasi Sahlberg presentation available at <https://pasisahlberg.com/presentations-pasi-sahlberg/presentations/rns-sydney-talk-2019/>

Broadly, the trends over the past 35 years have seen the deliberate and co-ordinated devaluing of teachers, public education and the teaching profession through privatisation, commercialisation, performance, accountability, and relentless focus on literacy and numeracy and large-scale assessment. There have been positive developments and push back in recent years and this is in part due to the collective work of teachers, researchers, parents and students who should be natural allies going forward. Mapping of sites of negative impacts of global reforms and positive stories of resistance suggests that nations and peoples in the Global South are generally having less success with resistance than Northern counterparts and thus need to be particularly supported through co-ordinated efforts whilst all nations and unions need to be vigilant towards new threats. Some useful approaches include emphasis on collaboration, creativity and flexibility, trust-based responsibility, strengthening professions and equity which can broadly be grouped around notions of professionalism.

There was a general optimism that many aspects of the devolutionary, performance and testing reforms of the 2000s and 2010s have revealed themselves to be ineffective in achieving their stated aims. At the same time, calls were made to acknowledge what has happened over the past 35 years (both the good and the negative) and to remember to tell those stories and histories to new members so that our conversations and actions are informed by these historical, intellectual and ideological contexts.

**Teacher Union Perspectives**

Maurie Mulheron and Greg Thompsonmoderated a discussion with representatives from a number of jurisdictions offering their initial insights into the impacts and drivers of current and emerging global education reforms:

Lynda Stuart and Michael Stevenson (New Zealand) – currently involved in significantindustrial action with an otherwise largely ‘friendly’ government and have achieved successful outcome where primary and secondary unions have worked together. Significant focuses have been early childhood education, wages, recruitment and charter schools. Other priorities include empowering members to advocate for the status of the profession in the public and intellectual space.

Kevin Bates and Maurie Mulheron (Australia) – focused on connecting global campaigns to the lived experiences of members with key efforts such as dismantling the NAPLAN literacy and numeracy assessments and offering alternatives to such assessments, along with strongly supporting Education International’s (EI) Commercialisation in Education project (e.g. to counter the growth of Pearson). Other significant moves into the professional spaces of professional learning, curriculum and standards and advocating for regulation and governance of all aspects of teachers work, initial teacher education, teacher control of assessment, and working, salary and award conditions.

Roar Grøttvik (Norway) – described the UEN strategy to position the union as the ‘expert in the middle’ of political and policy debates. Seeking to provide teachers with greater access to research materials in the face of an increasing trend towards government commissioned research which is producing reports which are more definitive and risk adverse than in the past. An expert commission produced a report *On the Role of the Teacher in 2016* which concluded that development work in Norwegian education had been heavily dominated by top-down policies. This conclusion has had major impact on the general educational debate and has spurred the union to initiate development work from within.

Eric Heins (California) – the CTA has engaged in significant and varied campaign fronts which range from fighting the effects of ranking and commodification of education, to for-profit prison systems which reflect structurally racist policy settings and target minorities. This work is simultaneously seeking to support the educational bureaucracy in advancing policies that reflect the commitments to equity and community development.

The morning session concluded with participants offering their various perspectives on emerging developments: the changing nature of educational governance; broadened scope of practice for teachers; merging of tech (Pearson and Google); pursuit of a global curriculum (Global Competency Framework); commercialization of assessment; amplification of GERM on multiple fronts).

Following the lunch break, Jean Stiles moderated a presentation led by Greg Thompsonthat examined the impacts of new networks of policy actors and agents including think tanks and ideological organizations. By 2030 we will see further atomization and populist politics; the further technicization of discourse and the continued following-out of the system.

Critical issues surrounding public engagement include astroturfing - the positioning of ideologically driven reforms as ‘grassroots’ – and the growing role of social media. Central to the presentation and the following discussion were questions for 2030: How will an individual or group become recognized as an expert? How will we judge reputation? How will network governance be shifted by the growth in new policy actors?

Carly Borelandconcluded the day with a synopsis and overview of critical issues and opportunities for collaboration ahead.

**Tuesday, March 26**

Maurie Mulheron reconvened the gathering with a recap of the previous day.

**Researcher Perspectives**: ***So What? Now what?***

Kevin Bates moderated a panel focussed on next steps to advance the work ahead of a network committed to research in the public interest: Denis Fitzgerald, Roar Grottvik, Rose Hipkins and Eric Heins.

The participants were encouraged to provoke and invite the group to consider commitments to advance the work ahead. Some key threads from the previous day’s discussions immediately below offered important background to the bulleted suggestions offered by the panel members.

Significant considerations included: ideological and commercial reach into curriculum, including the devaluing of knowledge and the false dichotomy between skills and content knowledge; work intensification and the impact this has on union membership; fragmentation of schools and systems and the distracting and welfare implications this has for members and the work of unions; personalisation and the capacity for commercial entities to circumvent government and school leaders by delivering products directly to teachers.

The Thompson presentation was well received and there appeared to be broad support for further research and publications outlining the particular range of network maps and forms of activities undertaken by education actors described. The deliberate and co-ordinated acts within and upon systems to break down unionism and collective action which has broad social-good aims, and promote and replace this with individual, hero-like, entities advocating their own personal agendas for private gain suggested a clear area of interest and urgency for further collaboration and action.

* We need to find ways to mobilize the interests of the state to preserve and enhance ‘the public’;
* International ‘companionship’ is what we ought to strive for: we are all struggling wit the same GERM-like symptoms;
* Collaboration leads to unexpected questions; we need to be prepared to be honest and courageous about this;
* We need to advance parent and public access to knowledge on contentious issues; (e.g. Media Centre for Educational Researchers);
* Ultimately mobilizing research in the public interest is political and is a political act as such – we need to be sincere and transparent about this;
* We need to think both short and long-term (i.e. immediate impact of PISA 2018 release)
* Given the complexity of policy mobilizations on a number of fronts, no one organization or structure can meaningfully track, engage and advocate for positive change.

**Sustaining the Network**

The gathering concluded with Howard Stevenson reviewing and reflecting on the possibilities for the follow-up summit in Manchester based on the bulleted items above. J-C Couture indicated that these suggestions will help to inform the follow-up Manchester seminar in November, 2019. A draft invitation from Sam Sellar (Appendix C) was circulated as information.

**Going Forward**

The working group below will take the lead towards a structure for an ongoing electronic network as well as providing input for the in-person summit in Manchester in November 2019 to be facilitated by Sellar/Couture:

Kevin Bates President, Queensland Teachers Union Australia

Roar Grøttvik Political Advisor, Union of Education Norway

Howard Stevenson Head of Training, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

Lynda Stuart President, New Zealand Education Institute, New Zealand

Rachel Wilson Senior Lecturer, University of Sydney, Australia

Questions were raised around how to enhance the diversity of the working group including reaching out to other organizations. This would likely require considering the over-representation of some already privileged groups.

Potential areas for future work included the following: designing research projects around teacher focused questions; aligning research agendas between academics and unions in the context of GERM 2.0; focusing on the status of the profession and creating opportunities for teachers to engage in discussions and thinking around imagining how public education could be; the growth and shift of ILSAs both in terms of scope as well platforms (i.e. data analytics, the privatization of data infrastructures and ramping up the collection of process data); pushing back against the normalization of neo-liberal policies including acceptance by the profession of mediocrity in policy and program implementation; and educating members and organization leaders around the workings of markets and efforts to deprofessionalize teachers.

The meeting concluded with Stevenson and Couture thanking the NSWTF for hosting the summit and indicating that the final synopsis notes of the summit would be circulated within the next ten days along with and further suggestions for the working group to continue its work.

Carly Boreland closed the meeting on behalf of the NSWTF and offered thanks to all participants.