

Dr. Ugnė Marija Andrijauskaitė
Research Council of Lithuania
u.andrijauskaite@lmt.lt

Building an Evidence Base for Education Reform: The EDU Project as a National Initiative

Research Overview

Evidence-informed education reform depends on both the supply of research and the demand for its use in policymaking (Vanlommel & van den Boom-Muilenburg, 2026). In Lithuania, both dimensions remain underdeveloped: research evidence rarely informs policy decisions (Budriūnaitė, 2016), while ministries face persistent gaps in analytical capacity (OECD, 2021). This paper addresses this structural disconnect by examining a national-level response designed to strengthen the role of evidence in education reform. More broadly, the study contributes to ongoing international discussions on how education systems can move beyond fragmented research use towards more systemic, coordinated, and impact-oriented approaches to knowledge production and utilisation.

Purpose of Study

Educational research in Lithuania has been historically underfunded and weakly integrated into policymaking. Between 2015 and 2022, it accounted for only 2% of all projects funded by the Research Council of Lithuania. At the same time, decision-making has tended to rely on readily available quantitative indicators rather than systematically generated research evidence. This reflects a broader structural challenge observed in many education systems, where the availability of data does not necessarily translate into meaningful evidence use, and where institutional mechanisms for connecting research and policy remain underdeveloped.

In response, Lithuania has initiated a large-scale, government-commissioned program in educational research. This paper presents the EDU project (“Breakthrough in Educational Research”) as a case of system-level intervention aimed at strengthening evidence-informed education policy. Rather than focusing solely on research outputs, the initiative seeks to

redesign the conditions under which research is produced, communicated, and used in decision-making processes.

The paper asks: *how can a coordinated national research program contribute to bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice?* It analyses how integrated funding, pilot experimentation, and policy engagement mechanisms can support evidence-informed reform, offering insights transferable to other small and medium-sized education systems.

Research Methods

The study draws on qualitative document analysis (policy reports, OECD reviews, national recommendations, and project documentation) combined with analytically grounded practitioner inquiry based on the author's role within the RCL. The analysis is interpretive and exploratory, focusing on program design, governance, and implementation processes rather than outcome evaluation.

Results and Discussion

Launched in 2025, the EDU project funds 28 research projects across seven universities and represents the first coordinated, large-scale national initiative dedicated exclusively to educational research in Lithuania. It also represents a significant shift in national research policy, both in terms of scale and in its explicit orientation towards policy relevance and societal impact.

The program introduces three interrelated mechanisms to strengthen evidence-informed reform:

- 1) Pilot experimentation: research projects incorporate pilot activities that test innovations in real educational settings, generating early evidence on feasibility, contextual adaptability, and scalability. These pilots are particularly important in bridging the gap between theoretical models and real-world implementation, allowing researchers to observe how innovations function across diverse school contexts and to identify practical constraints that may not be visible in controlled research environments.
- 2) Governance innovation: project selection is conducted by an international expert panel, while a cross-sectoral monitoring group, comprising policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, which provides ongoing oversight and creates a structured space for continuous

policy dialogue. This governance structure institutionalises interaction between key stakeholders and reduces the distance between knowledge production and decision-making processes.

3) Research–practice integration: teachers and schools are directly involved in research processes, shifting their role from passive recipients of knowledge to active co-creators of evidence. Such involvement supports mutual learning and increases the likelihood that research findings are relevant, applicable, and accepted within educational practice.

In parallel, the paper highlights a key systemic challenge: the misalignment between short-term funding cycles (3–4 years) and the long-term nature of educational impact. To address this, the study proposes an emerging approach to impact evaluation based on intermediate indicators, including policy uptake, stakeholder engagement, and observable changes in practice. The EDU project demonstrates a shift from fragmented and weakly utilised research production towards a coordinated, system-level approach to evidence-informed education reform.

It is argued that research impact in education systems is not only a function of research quality, but of the institutional infrastructures that connect research, practice, and policy. By combining research funding, pilot experimentation, and structured policy engagement, the EDU project offers a replicable model for strengthening evidence use in education policymaking.

Keywords: evidence-informed policy; education reform; research infrastructure; national research initiative; Lithuania