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Review of Reviews
A report for the Steering Committee
1 Background

1.1 This report is not a technical document intended for publication. It is a report to the Steering Committee of the Teaching and Learning Programme. The purpose of the report is to provide the Committee with an appraisal of where the gaps are in the field of research on teaching and learning as these relate to the aims of the Programme and might be revealed in the processes of reviewing.

1.2 Before reporting on the corpus of reviews it is necessary to say something about reviews and the reviewing process in educational research. This is because the nature, aims, objectives and methods of reviewing are contested issues in the field. For those interested in the details, the debates are most explicitly conducted both in theoretical and practical terms in the pages of the most widely cited review journal, Review of Educational Research (RER) published by the American Educational Research Association.

1.3 At the heart of the debate lie fundamental differences in views about the nature of education. To put the issue starkly, there are those who take the view that education is, 'a deliberate human enterprise that aims to empower individuals to increase their social mobility, obtain a better job and so on' (Schwandt, RER, 1998 p.410). In this perspective educational research is conducted to identify 'what works' with a view to improving the educational enterprise.

Educational research progresses by understanding educational processes through scientific studies which build a picture of the field piece by piece. The review examines all the single studies of an issue and, by means of induction, synthesises the individual findings into a general conclusion. A good review will resolve inconsistencies and settle an argument. Is, for example, small group working better than whole class teaching in promoting student achievement and motivation?

1.4 This technological view of education and educational research is challenged by those who hold the view that