

## **Case study of TLRP: its origins and purposes, a brief description of activities, and key issues relating to impact**

### ***The UK's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (www.tlrp.org)***

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TLRP is the Economic and Social Research Council's largest research programme and provides coordination for over 500 researchers in some 60 project teams and over 20 initiatives of cross-programme thematic analysis across the UK. The first projects began empirical work in 2000 and the last project is presently expected to end in 2011. The total budget in the autumn of 2006 was some £37m and drew contributions from a wide range of UK government bodies.

The origins of the Programme can be traced to the mid-1990s when educational research was heavily criticised for being small scale, irrelevant, inaccessible and low quality. Whether or not these criticisms were entirely justified, researchers faced major challenges in demonstrating the value of investment in this field. Fortunately, thanks initially to the imagination and commitment of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, a new opportunity was created through TLRP.

TLRP's overarching strategy has been to support research which is of both high quality in social scientific terms and of high relevance in terms of policy and practice – to satisfy the criteria of 'Pasteur's Quadrant'. At the same time, considerable effort has gone into impact work, capacity building across the field of educational research and in 'bridging' between the worlds of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. Over time, we believe that a greater respect for, and understanding of, the complementary forms of expertise has been developing.

The success of the overall initiative is indicated by the steady growth of the TLRP budget (now almost four times greater than the initial figure), by the model of user-researcher collaboration set by the Programme, the eagerness of researchers to become involved and by the take up of findings by practitioners and public bodies. A recent independent review of TLRP concluded that the quality and relevance of the research was high (see [www.tlrp.org/manage/documents/NFER\\_Final\\_TLRP\\_Report\\_March\\_2005.pdf](http://www.tlrp.org/manage/documents/NFER_Final_TLRP_Report_March_2005.pdf)). There are no grounds for complacency though and 'evidence-informed policy and practice' remains beset by challenges. We do, however, feel that we have been making some progress.

#### *Aims*

TLRP's aims emphasise the positive contribution being made by research on teaching and learning. More specifically, they are:

*Learning:* TLRP aims to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

*Outcomes:* TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes. These include both the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

*Lifecourse:* TLRP supports research projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning. The Programme is concerned with patterns of success and difference, inclusion and exclusion through the lifecourse.

*Enrichment:* TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. The Programme promotes research on teaching and learning across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports various forms of national and international

co-operation and comparison.

*Expertise:* TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research-informed policy and practice. This work is the particular focus of the Programme's research capacity building strategy.

*Improvement:* TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and contributes to the improvement of policy and practice in the UK. The Programme works to maximise the impact of its research.

TLRP's overall development is driven by six key strategic commitments:

- User engagement for relevance and quality
- Knowledge generation by project teams
- Knowledge synthesis through thematic activities
- Knowledge transformation for impact
- Capacity building for professional development
- Partnerships for sustainability

Because of the duration, scale and complexity of TLRP, these elements are managed simultaneously - for instance, with some projects being commissioned just as others complete. However, as the Programme matures, there is also a progressive change in the balance of activity, with more emphasis being placed on knowledge synthesis, transformation and impact. Explicit strategies to underpin post-Programme *sustainability* are being developed in relation to capacity building, the use of ICT to support research development in the field and the deepening of partnerships with cognate bodies.

*User engagement for relevance and quality ([www.tlrp.org/users](http://www.tlrp.org/users)):*

Project teams work closely with practitioners and others in their research sites and also to link up with key national organisations with potentially 'high leverage' for dissemination and impact activity. Such relationships are reflected in the membership of project 'Advisory Groups'.

The Directors' Team maintain links with high-leverage user organisations in each educational sector and in each part of the UK. TLRP also works directly with governments in each part of the UK to maximise the use of its research. TLRP has been represented by the Director on significant national bodies for the coordination of education research in Wales (Education and Training Research Liaison Committee of the National Assembly for Wales); England (National Education Research Forum and the DfES Schools Research Advisory Group); Scotland (Management Committee of the Applied Educational Research Scheme). The Programme has also sustained excellent links with senior government officials in Northern Ireland and presented at the 2005 conference on the restructuring of teacher education.

*Knowledge generation by project teams ([www.tlrp.org/projects](http://www.tlrp.org/projects)):*

In 2000, TLRP started by funding four networks of projects. A second phase brought in nine larger projects and this was followed by funding of twelve more. At the same time, focused funding initiatives have made specific provision for teams in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales – and for some high priority topics (such as widening participation in higher education and concerning technology enhanced learning). Additionally, there have been five different types of investment in capacity building – ranging from fellowships, training to e-resource development. With researchers from a large number of universities actively involved, the responsibility is devolved but the Directors' Team provides critical friendship and encourages collaboration across projects.

*Knowledge synthesis through thematic activities ([www.tlrp.org/themes](http://www.tlrp.org/themes)):*

The Programme's strategy for thematic development is a major focus of work as the initiative matures. The portfolio of initiatives to add value through cross-Programme analysis includes: consultancies, thematic groups, thematic seminar series, conferences, workshops, thematic meta-tagging of outputs and sectoral reviews. A conceptual framework is used to organise and integrate this work.

*Knowledge transformation for impact (www.tlrp.org/publications):*

TLRP's impact strategy is a multi-level one, in which we try to produce research findings in forms which are tailored to specific audiences. We both produce many of our own publications and also work extensively with user bodies to maximise impact. Outputs include 'Research Briefings' (summarising findings), 'TLRP Commentaries' (applying findings to contemporary issues), practitioner applications (classroom activities drawing on research), books (in two series with Routledge), journals (including many special issues), reports, etc. TLRP also uses an electronic repository and meta-tagging system called D-space. This has been adopted for deposition of all project publications and has significantly improved the availability of outputs via the internet and major databases. Downloads from the website ([www.tlrp.org](http://www.tlrp.org)) have considerably exceeded our expectations, with several TLRP Commentaries on public policy leading the way (one exceeding 50,000 downloads in a year).

Such Commentaries are an interesting example of our approach. They are attractively designed in a glossy, four colour A4 format and are designed to provide a concise and accessible evidence-informed commentary on a contemporary, up-to-the-minute issue. The timescale of this is important, for most research takes years from commissioning to publication. We wanted to find a 'rapid response' vehicle which could present the unique insights of researchers into public discussion as it happens in our fast-moving democracy. Each Commentary is thus the product of a group of researchers and users working together in a very short timescale with editors, designers, printers and distributors standing by. Documents on Personalised Learning, Teaching and Learning, Science Education have been produced in this way and another on Neuroscience and Education is in production. Although such documents gloss the detail of the evidence-base, we have found them to have a considerable impact in highlighting key issues. For example, the English Department for Education and Science has recently published a document, '2020 Vision', setting out a new approach to the personalisation of teaching and learning in schools which is very consistent with the directions indicated by TLRP research. We certainly cannot claim cause and effect but it is evident that the contributions which the research programme makes have been considered seriously and many of the key themes which TLRP has been working on are reflected in the report - for instance, on pupil voice, learning how to learn, engaging parents and carers, new technologies, professional learning and researcher-practitioner partnerships..

TLRP's commitment to transforming and disseminating research knowledge in partnership with other bodies is an extremely important foundation for all our impact work. In particular, we have identified a small number of high-leverage user organisations in each educational sector and in each part of the UK. Key users, such as the General Teaching Council (England), the National College for School Leadership, the Learning and Skills Development Agency, the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education and Department for Education and Skills, have been extremely helpful in the dissemination of results through their communication systems. TLRP also works directly with governments in each part of the UK to maximise the use of its research. For instance, the Programme held its 2006 Annual Conference in partnership with policy-makers in Scotland and this is to be followed up with the placement of Research Fellows bridging government departments and the Programme itself.

*Capacity building for professional development (www.tlrp.org/capacity):*

Capacity building is an intrinsic part of TLRP's work. Indeed, in all phases of TLRP funding, it has been a criterion for project selection, and this work is supported, monitored and reported on each year. Particular attention has been paid to skill and career development of contract research staff, with special events each year. Additionally, with support from the Department for Education and Skills, TLRP has funded five Research Training Fellowships, which enable senior practitioners to study part-time for PhD's in association with TLRP projects.

From 2002-2005 the Programme's Research Capacity Building Network provided cross-Programme training services in the research methods which were felt to be particularly appropriate in the study of teaching and learning. Each included: research design issues, the use of large-scale data-sets, and the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. RCBN also initiated a journal, Research Capacity Building. A new strategy for capacity

building provision has been adopted for 2005-8. This is based on an explicit attempt to embed processes for the development of research expertise within the social practices of educational researchers and is intended to complement other provision through the National Centre for Research Methods and Research Methods Programme. Additionally, there are close working relationships with the Applied Research in Education Scheme in Scotland and with relevant UK learned societies, such as the British Educational Research Association. A particular feature of TLRP's new provision is the promotion of a range of e-resources for research training which will be freely available to institutions and groups across the UK. In short, the objective of TLRP's capacity building work is to work *with* the academic community and to support the development of new forms of commitment and provision for the professional self-improvement of educational researchers.

*Partnerships for sustainability:*

Despite its size, TLRP is still small in relation to the challenge and range educational research. It is also only expected to exist for a limited period. For such reasons, we have sought to develop close working relationships with other organisations. A least five different forms of partnership can be identified.

First, we seek expertise from which we can benefit. Such partnerships exist with the British Education Index (BEI) for electronic knowledge management, the Cambridge Centre for Applied Research in Education Technology (CARET) for development of an advanced ICT infrastructure, and Routledge for book and journal publications. Second, as indicated above, we work with key user organisations which are generous enough to promote TLRP work through their communications systems, and thus lend us some of their leverage as we attempt to maximise impact. Third, we work with partners where cooperation enables us to be more effective – for example, a recent TES special supplement was co-funded with NIACE and LSDA. Indeed, TLRP aspires to contribute to a series of sectoral reviews, developed in partnership with others. For example TLRP contributes to the Nuffield Foundation's 14-19 Review, and Esmee Fairbairn Trust's Primary Education. Similar work is undertaken with the Institute for Employment Research on work-based learning. Fourth, as indicated previously, we work where we can with the government bodies which help to form policy regarding education research within each country of the UK.

For some years too, TLRP has contributed to the work of the National Education Research Forum (NERF), through the membership of first Charles Desforges and, more recently, myself. This has been valuable both in the expression of support and reservation for particular initiatives, as appropriate. For example, TLRP has contributed actively to discussions and development work on the establishment of a National Education Evidence Portal (NEEP).

Finally, we work with organisations which may, in due course, take on some of the resources, assets or commitments of TLRP into the future. Indeed, one of our informal goals is to 'give everything away' by the end. The most important legacy organisations are seen as being among the professional research associations – and, in particular the British Educational Research Association (BERA). TLRP participants are active in membership and a number of key positions are held by colleagues who bridge both organisations. There are many areas on which cooperation is developing, including joint capacity building activities and the possibility of eventual transfer of tools and components from of TLRP's IT infrastructure. On the capacity building front, we are also very pleased to be working with the research committee of the University Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET). Other associations with which we have collaborated closely include the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE), with major contributions being made to their annual conferences.

*Conclusion*

TLRP represents a major opportunity for UK educational research. It aims to contribute new knowledge for the improvement of learning – but it also aspires to improve the quality of the educational research which will be available in the future.

We feel we have some successes – but we also experience many challenges and frustrations. For example, with such a wide range of aspirations, we find it impossible to follow up on all the opportunities which present themselves. In such a complex society too, it is extremely difficult to know how to focus our limited resources and track impact with precision. Most fundamentally, we struggle between the assumptive worlds of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in the knowledge of considerable differences in their daily experiences, cultures, priorities, accountabilities and incentivisation systems. Sometimes, things get lost and, to our eyes, opportunities are missed.

Overall though, TLRP has provided an opportunity for educational researchers in the UK to regroup after the critiques of the mid-1990s. The work produced now is generally well received and we believe that the research community is justified in being more confident in facing the future (though the plight of teacher-educators engaged in research is a rather different story). The policy climate is more open than it once was and, even allowing for some selectivity, there is greater respect for evidence. We feel that we have both benefited from such developments and contributed to them.

The Programme has recently been funded to take forward a more focused group of projects on Technology Enhanced Learning to 2011 and beyond, but its broad portfolio will end by mid-2008. Books and other publications will continue to emerge for some years. Additionally, UK leadership in knowledge creation in education will to be taken up by ESRC investment in a small number of Research Centres on more focused topics, whilst the capacity building role of TLRP will be taken forward through the National Centre for Research Methods or other specific initiatives. The Programme will, therefore, pass the educational baton on to new forms of research organisation. We hope that these new research teams will benefit from a climate in which educational research is seen as an important contributor to high quality policy making and professional practice in an open, democratic society.

Note 1: TLRP researchers are extremely interested in sharing experiences and learning from those engaged in similar work in other countries internationally. Please see [www.tlrp.org/international](http://www.tlrp.org/international) for details of some links and get in touch if you would like to develop an association with the Programme. In the first instance, please contact: Alan Brown, Associate Director, TRLP at [alan.brown@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:alan.brown@warwick.ac.uk) . Andrew Pollard can be contacted at [a.pollard@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:a.pollard@ioe.ac.uk)

Note 2: A more extensive account of TLRP strategies and of some of the challenges and opportunities with which it has engaged is available at: <http://www.tlrp.org/dspace/handle/123456789/380> . This is the text of the Annual Educational Review Guest Lecture, 2005, by Andrew Pollard.