CHALLENGES FACING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH (1)

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INTRODUCTION

It is almost a decade now since the mid-1990s when the critique of UK educational research was at its height (eg: Hargreaves, 1996; Tooley and Darby, 1998; Hillage et al, 1998). Work was deemed to be of poor quality scientifically, weakly focused on issues of relevance to policy and practice and badly communicated. Time moves on and some of the challenges have been moderated – but many of the underlying issues have not, and will not, go away. New hurdles and challenges also emerge and demand responses.

As Director of the ESRC’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) (www.tlrp.org) since 2002, I have been heavily involved in these issues. TLRP was established in the context of the critique and was, in part, intended as an intervention to achieve ‘improvement’ in what was deemed to be a ‘weak’ field of research. In a sense then, TLRP originated in the belief that something ‘needed to be done’ about educational research. It was a major initiative, starting with funding of over £10m and growing to deploy some £32m through almost 70 specific investments. Although TLRP is managed by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council, funds are drawn from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Education Departments in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England.

At the time of my 2005 Educational Review lecture, from which this paper is derived, TLRP was a little over half way through its anticipated duration. The first projects had begun work in January 2000, and major publications were expected to continue to 2010 and beyond. 2005 was a good point therefore, to both take stock of TLRP and consider the challenges which might lie ahead. This paper focuses on the latter, but I begin with a brief review of TLRP’s progress to date (2).

TLRP has been funding high quality research projects on a wide range of topics covering the lifecourse and with unusually high levels of user engagement. Its thematic work has been developing rapidly to link specific project work to more generic enduring issues. Its communication and impact infrastructure is supporting project teams with print and electronic dissemination. Its policy task groups and event programme have been developed to try to apply this knowledge to contemporary problems more quickly. Indeed, the TLRP Directors’ Team (3) have, with the support of ESRC and the TLRP Steering Committee, tried to build an infrastructure and establish social practices and relationships which are capable of both representing the quality of educational research to others and sustaining challenges within our own research community. In respect of both audiences, we have tried to do this in constructive ways and to build mutual respect and understanding. In summary, we have tried to engage in a strategy I call ‘reflexive activism’.

‘Reflexive activism’ is a creative, but self-conscious and socially aware, form of mediation between external critique, constraint and pressure and the social practices, values and perspectives which characterise the academic field. It represents a commitment to act politically if appropriate, but also to take the initiative in the development of the research field. It recognises the need for reflexive awareness of strengths and weaknesses within the field itself and the need to recognise, face and work on contemporary challenges.

TLRP’s reflexive activism, so far, appears to have been a productive strategy and the quality of work emanating from the Programme has been affirmed. For example, NFER’s Mid-term Review of TLRP (Rudd, Rickinson and Walker 2005), commissioned by ESRC, assessed the quality of research, user engagement, research synergies and added value, capacity building and impact on policy and practice. The report was pleasingly positive (see http://www.tlrp.org/manage/progrep.html). For example:
The review team found the quality of the Programme’s research to be very high. No serious criticisms were raised in relation to academic rigour, and several projects were seen to go well beyond previous work in this field. (p 13)

It is clear that TLRP has already made major strides in terms of: helping to raise the profile of educational research; promoting interesting forms of cross-institutional working; engaging with significant groups of practitioners and policy-makers; and stimulating and supporting projects of a high quality across a range of teaching and learning contexts. (p 51)

The recent growth in the funds which have been entrusted to the Programme, coming from HEFCE and each UK government, is also very encouraging – as were the generous comments made by Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of ESRC at his 2005 address to the BERA Conference.

Such progress reflects the enormous hard work of a very large number of research colleagues and has been, above all, a collective achievement. There are excellent links with government departments and agencies and a wide range of other civic bodies across the UK and this offers good promise for the overall impact of the Programme. Additionally however, I hope and believe that TLRP has become an initiative which is felt to be ‘working with’ colleagues in the field and supporting them in meeting contemporary challenges. The intention has certainly been to work constructively and to build on the positive – moving beyond the assumption of generalised deficiency which appeared to characterise earlier critiques.

Arguably however, we continue to be in a transitional phase in the history of educational research. Whilst we are now able to place critique in perspective and may have earned something of an intellectual breathing space, things continue to change all around us – for instance, in knowledge management, research methodology, teacher education, public sector ‘reform’ and research funding mechanisms.

What then are the major contemporary challenges which we face? What are the challenges for reflexive activism in the future?

In this paper I offer some thoughts on these issues based on my experience in working on TLRP over the past five years, as an applicant, project award holder and Programme Director. I distinguish four types of challenge - ‘contextual’, ‘conceptual’, ‘methodological’ and ‘transformational’, each of which is rehearsed in a subsequent part of this paper. The paper concludes by calling for an academic initiative to establish a UK Forum for Educational Research:

- Contextual challenges – improving opportunities?
- Conceptual challenges – improving understanding?
- Methodological challenges – improving applied research?
- Transformational challenges – improving impact?
- UK opportunity – towards a UK Forum for Educational Research?

These are intended as a contribution to the continuing academic debate which is necessary – and I hope that others may dispute, reinterpret or augment these observations as the process continues.
CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES - IMPROVING OPPORTUNITIES?

Can we further promote contemporary commitments to ‘evidence informed’ policy and practice?

The rhetoric of government policy-making asserts that policy will, whenever possible, be based on careful consideration of available research evidence. Of course, we have to be extremely realistic about this, and there are many examples of limits in its implementation and of the power of more political considerations. However, it remains a very significant commitment and, in principle, establishes a clear and positive role for researchers in contributing to democratic decision making. This has not always been so. Further, the recent frustrations of New Labour in achieving change in public services may create greater willingness to listen to new ideas and analyses than we have seen for some time.

This is thus a real opportunity for educational researchers who are willing to engage with governments across the UK, and government funded research is running at exceptional levels in many research institutions. At the same time, we need to support UK governments in this ‘evidence informed’ aspiration and hold them to account as necessary.

It is worth noting too that this commitment is the route to large-scale funding of longer, multidisciplinary projects with more sophisticated research designs than have normally been possible in the past.

In relation to evidence informed practice, the situation may be more complex. There is considerable support for practitioner research as a form of professional development and there have been many specific initiatives to support its development. The GTCs and many teacher associations have been strongly in favour but the cost and challenge of system-wide implementation has so far seemed too great for at least the English government. Apart from the cost, one wonders if the enhancement of teachers’ capacity for independent decision-making is seen as a priority. The position taken, and investments made, by the new TDA will be crucial in this – and given the weakening of local government’s educational infrastructures, if devolved strategies are adopted, there could be a significant role for HEIs in the future.

Can we promote a more realistic public understanding of the nature of social science and of the nature of the knowledge which is typically produced?

One of the challenges which educational researchers have faced in recent years has been that of demonstrating ‘what works’, an argument which often draws rhetoric from comparisons with medical research. In my opinion, expectations of categoric certainty as a product of social science are naïve – and suggest a lack of ontological and epistemological awareness. It is a hard challenge, but my view is that we need to try to promote a more realistic public perception of the status of knowledge of the sort produced by educational research, and social science generally.

At the same time, we need to establish alternative and constructive (but realistic) stances. For instance, in relation to education, I often argue the following:

As in other fields of applied social science, cause-and-effect (or ‘what works’) is often hard to establish precisely, but educational research nevertheless has the potential to
provide information, analysis and insight, and thus to significantly improve understanding and decision making by users.

Educational problems, of practice or policy, are often complex and immediate – but are invariably grounded in more enduring issues which merit both practitioner enquiry and sustained, cumulative, multi-disciplinary, social scientific research. The introduction of evidence can clarify the key factors and major dilemmas which practitioners and/or policy-makers face in decision-making.

TLRP is taking this stance in its dealings with policy makers and in supporting the professional judgement and expertise of practitioners. For example, this is evident in the analyses of issues and dilemmas within the TLRP Commentaries on ‘Personalised Learning’, ‘14-19 Education’ and ‘Teaching and Learning in Schools’.

Such arguments do not mean however, that education and educational researchers (and other social scientists) can by-pass a responsibility to work to achieve the highest degrees of confidence in their findings and analyses as possible. There is little doubt that much more could be done in this regard and the status of the field is undermined when the issue is glossed. In TLRP, we have had sustained debates on the nature of the ‘warrants’ which may be available for project findings. As a consequence, each project’s Research Briefing includes a statement outlining the methodological foundations of the study.

As part of a campaign to establish a more realistic public understanding of social scientific knowledge, it may also be possible to promote greater appreciation of different types of research in the field.

Can we find ways of overcoming tensions about the nature of research in education and the strains which structural differentiation in HE has produced?

There is a continuing lack of clarity over the meaning of the term ‘research’ within the field. Views are patterned by underlying value commitments, practices, professional communities, careers and institutional interests. However, it is perhaps possible to identify three main forms of work: ‘education research’, ‘educational research’ and ‘professional enquiry’.

Building on Whitty’s inaugural lecture as BERA President (2005), ‘education research’ rests on the major contributory disciplines of education and on the significance of the production of new forms of knowledge for their own sake. ‘Educational research’ is more applied, seeking to use disciplinary insights, theories and methodological tools in illuminating issues of policy or practice – and most of TLRP’s projects would fall into this category. As Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of ESRC, confirmed in his 2005 address to the BERA conference, there is a significant and growing amount of high quality education and educational research work in the UK, both quantitative and qualitative. This draws on social scientific designs and methods and is gradually building a more sophisticated understanding of enduring educational issues. However, such work is undertaken by only a minority of educationalists in HE, with a concentration in research-intensive universities.

There is also a large amount of practitioner research or ‘professional enquiry’ - much of which is of great value in the improvement of practice and, in the hands of some, can also illuminate more enduring issues. Indeed the UK has an international reputation for the quality of such work. Quite properly, such activity is often associated with and promoted by institutions with strong traditions of teacher education and professional development.

Patterns in the distribution of these forms of research cannot be divorced from consideration of the structure of initial teacher education and the consequences of successive rounds of
research selectivity through the UK’s research assessment exercise (RAE). In this context, any statement on the issue must acknowledge the remarkable capacity of dedicated educationalists in disadvantaged circumstances to engage in research. Some of this is of excellent quality, with specialist centres in some ‘modern’ universities and colleges making particularly strong contributions. However, in peer review assessments, the quality of much of such work is often felt to be relatively weak in social science terms.

Whilst some of the best educational research bridges these traditions and circumstances, tensions between them may also be seen as limiting progress within the field. New ways of recognising, distinguishing and affirming the value of complementary forms of research and enquiry are needed – and again organisations such as BERA and the TDA have significant roles to play. TLRP will try to facilitate around the edges, but this is a major, highly complex, issue.

**Can we counter demographic imbalances among educational researchers and embrace research capacity building as professional self-development?**

A high proportion of the UK’s active educational researchers, including many of those with a social science background, are expected to retire within the next ten years. There are also significant regional and national differences in UK educational research capacity, with Wales and Northern Ireland facing particular challenges. The number of home-based higher degree students is insufficient for replacement.

There is a pressing need to ensure that future generations of educational researchers have the time and capacity to develop the theoretical advances needed to meet new research challenges and are skilled in a variety of different methodologies and approaches including conducting practice-based research, secondary data analysis, quantitative and statistical analysis, integration of qualitative and quantitative data; international comparative research, research synthesis, etc. At present of course, there are particular shortages in high level quantitative expertise.

However, for HE institutions specialising in education, the differentiating effect of post-RAE funding allocations has been very significant indeed. This is one of the main reasons behind TLRP’s support for the creation of transferable ‘modules’ to support capacity building in education institutions which suffer from insufficient core funding for research development. Of course, the resources of ESRC’s National Centre for Research Methods remain available to all.

Welcome though such initiatives may be, the TLRP experience suggests that the research community continues at present to find it hard to embrace the explicit development of expertise as an integral part of personal and institutional development. In large part perhaps, this may relate to the conditions of work for both academic and contract staff, but that can also be seen as an excuse. Do we really take seriously our own professional development?

TLRP’s capacity building email ‘alert’ services, website, journal and training module initiative are all ways of trying to support such engagement, but the energy, agency and prioritisation to make use of such facilities must come from colleagues and institutions themselves.

**Can we sustain constructive and respectful ways of conducting necessary intellectual struggles across ‘tribes and territories’?**
The present community of educational researchers continues to be characterised by considerable methodological and epistemological diversity, and there are strengths in this. Indeed, subject to the risk of allegiances being driven more by fashion rather than appropriateness, if bio-diversity offers resources for future problems which we may not yet have imagined, then perhaps something similar could be said for theoretical diversity?

A downside, however, seems to be that the climate in which educational issues are debated can sometimes become highly charged as colleagues with different allegiances, networks, theoretical positions, methodological commitments, etc, critique each other. In part, perhaps this is inevitable given education’s influence on future generations, for the field is also often caught up in debates on ‘what is, and what ought to be’. For these reasons, judgement and values are necessarily involved at points of research conceptualisation and application, whether by researchers, practitioners or policy-makers.

It is important to remember too, that academic debate, difference and argument, make essential contributions to the progress of the field. Further, many of the issues which have been hard fought in recent years have been of great significance in evolving responses to external critique. My personal unease comes when this leads to internal battles which sometimes appear to fail to respect the integrity of the individuals concerned. This is not just a matter of ‘being nice’ to each other, important though respect for different positions may be. It is also about creating the conditions in which constructive debate can take place so that important issues may be resolved or moved forward.

Overall, though I would argue that in the past few years there has been greater respect for, and appreciation of, different positions and acceptance of ‘fitness for purpose’. The production of Furlong and Oancea’s (2005) analysis of quality criteria for assessing applied and practice–based research is one example of this, and recent seminar workshops convened by TLRP on ‘Reviewing Reviews’ is facilitating constructive dialogue among those involved in both systematic and other forms of review.

BERA creates opportunities to support such processes through the annual conference, special interest groups, Research Intelligence and the British Educational Research Journal - and recent Presidents, such as Anne Edwards and John Furlong, have worked assiduously on such issues. An improving climate for debate is creating, in my view, new possibilities for collective progress.

TLRP is active on this too, working across many disciplines, theories, methodologies, sectors and institutions. The distributed nature of the Directors’ Team has proved to be an asset, with contacts into a wide range of academic networks. One other practical facility which may prove to be of future importance concerns the development of virtual research environments (VREs). TLRP, in partnership with Cambridge’s Centre for Applied Research on Educational Technology and funding from JISC, has already done a good deal of work on this and it is hoped, in due course, to make the technology available to BERA’s special interest groups. With modern technologies, we should perhaps expect quite rapidly changing media for future academic debate – but the need to combine robust argument with interpersonal respect will remain.

CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES – IMPROVING UNDERSTANDING?

How can we contribute to debates on future research priorities and locate these within existing knowledge and understanding?
A robust, sustainable and inclusive foresight system does not, at present, exist for UK educational research. This is a major problem in enabling researchers in the field to take the initiative in influencing 'issues for investigation' rather than simply accepting those which might reflect political priorities at a particular point in time. In an era in which very large projects are being encouraged, the establishment of priorities is particularly important even for responsive mode applications.

Of course, the National Educational Research Forum has taken a number of initiatives to try to fill this void but has not, in my view, won the legitimacy or assembled the expertise or range of stakeholders which would be needed to tackle it successfully. This could be an area in which a UK-wide organisation such as BERA could take a lead. ESRC, with its concern with the 'health of disciplines', also occasionally collates views of relevance to this and is to do so again in 2006 as part of a strategic review.

In such exercises, it seems to me to be important to try to improve on the simple and all-too-common 'listing' of popular topics of concern, with almost no rationale or theorisation underpinning them. Such a strategy makes it difficult to see patterns, relationships to previous knowledge and potential for cumulation. There is a role here for theory!

TLRP faces similar problems and, indeed, the Directors’ Team is increasingly focused on activities to ‘take stock’ of the overall findings of the Programme and what they tell us about enduring educational issues. As part of this, a major rationalisation of the Programme’s thematic development strategy took place during 2004 and this is the major tool for adding value. It is based on a simple conceptual framework (see below).

This framework is being used to organise existing thematic work and to commission new initiatives. It is also the basis of the Programme’s data-base of user and research interests and of the meta-tagging system which underpins TLRP’s D-Space repository of outputs.
This illustrates one approach. How though, could we progressively take stock of what we think we know across the field as a whole? And how might such understanding then inform decision-making about priorities for future research?

At the present time, the field is fragmented and segmented in so many ways that practitioners, policy makers and ESRC researchers often remain uncertain about key aspects of educational knowledge. How then, can we debate, refine and communicate what we think we know in ways which are appropriate to the state of our knowledge?

**METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES: IMPROVING APPLIED RESEARCH?**

Can we offer appropriate warrants for our findings?

There are some pretty standard issues about research quality which colleagues tackle routinely at the point of grant application. Such scientific questions lie at the core of TLRP’s funding assessment criteria. Thus we have:

*Contribution to Knowledge.* Is the proposal grounded in a thorough review of the extant literature in relevant fields? Does the proposal have a coherent theoretical and analytical framework? Is it likely to make a significant contribution to the development of the current research knowledge base?

*Research Design and Methods.* Does the proposal clearly and fully describe a research design appropriate for the achievement of the stated research objectives? Is the project time-scale appropriate to the research design? Are there rigorous methods for assessing learning outcomes (broadly conceived)? Are there realistic proposals for data-collection and data-analysis? Has careful consideration been given to any ethical issues that may be raised?

In TLRP, we have tried to sustain a reflexive awareness of these issues throughout the research process. This happens through processes such as the annual conference presentations, the project reporting procedure and through the request, at the end of the research, to explicitly take stock in terms of what it is reasonable to conclude from its findings. What, we ask, is the ‘warrant’ of the research? What can the research team say which will enable the public, practitioners, policy makers or other researchers to evaluate how much confidence they should place in the findings? Such warrant statements feature on every TLRP *Research Briefing* and the issue is explicitly addressed within the *Improving Learning* book series.

I would argue that this review of the warrant of a set of findings is about rigour and transparency, represents a public obligation and is in the interests of educational research as a field.

This argument accepts, of course, that there are many forms of warrant and that each approach should be appropriate to the type of research being reported. Where an approach is associated with critiques of some particular forms of research or with heavy-handed calls for inappropriately structured information, then it will quite properly be challenged.

It is important to hang on to the bigger issues. These are, first, that the public has a legitimate right to be provided with a clear account of the methodological basis of our research so that the status of findings and analyses can be evaluated. Second, that it is in
the interests of educational researchers to demonstrate research quality and to promote their expertise more transparently.

My personal hope then is that educational researchers will fully engage with this issue, make it their own and shape expectations and emerging conventions.

Can we enhance quality through appropriate user engagement?

‘User engagement’ is one of the mantras of the last decade, and has been articulated by many funders (including ESRC) in relation to all applied social science. It has been taken particularly seriously within education, for example, by TLRP. Notwithstanding some terminological in-exactitude, a simple representation of the argument identifies ‘partners’, ‘advisers’ and ‘users’ in relation to participation at different stages in the research process.

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<th>Experience a problem</th>
<th>Partners work alongside researchers throughout the research</th>
<th>Advisers support progress at key points</th>
<th>Users help to transform findings as they become available</th>
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TLRP experience suggests that the relevance, significance, quality and impact of each project's research can be enhanced by close user engagement, and that research users often become wonderfully effective 'champions' for project teams and their work. Whilst ‘user’ and ‘adviser’ roles help, the more significant contribution is that of a research ‘partner’, engaged throughout the research process. In such circumstances, learning can be in both directions and both the technical validity and practical implementation of the research can be enhanced.

Indeed, the NFER mid-term review of TLRP highlighted ‘evidence of considerable progress’ in relation to user engagement by both the Programme and its projects.

On the basis of interviews with project practitioners and researchers, the picture was a largely encouraging one of productive relationships and shared benefits. In terms of liaison with policy-makers and user organisations, the degree of activity of this kind was seen by many as a distinctive strength of TLRP relative to other research programmes. There was also positive feedback from policy interviewees for the Programme's willingness to engage with partner bodies and policy debates.

This argument needs to be approached carefully however, because user engagement of these sorts may not be appropriate across all forms of education and educational research. In particular, there is a long-established tension between the role of analysts in 'taking' research questions or independently 'making' their own. Lurking too is Becker's challenge: 'whose side are we on?' which highlights the question of which users a research team chooses to engage with. Indeed, there may be occasions when the research evidence requires an independent challenge to an established user perspective.
NERF has recently begun to promote the idea of ‘development and research’ (‘D & R’) projects, as opposed to ‘R&D’ work. This takes the argument further and is an interesting development, but it is again crucial that fitness for purpose considerations apply.

**Can we build understanding on the accumulated work of others?**

In principle, few would dispute the importance of framing new research in terms of what is already known. Thus we have the ‘review of literature’. This has traditionally taken many forms depending on factors such as the nature of the research question or focus, the audience/s for which it is created and the range of literature which is under review. There is great scope for the demonstration of both expertise – and for partiality.

Three initial issues need to be faced. First, there is the globalisation and exponential growth of ‘knowledge’, with new repositories of electronic information appearing across the world linked by increasingly sophisticated knowledge management systems. Second, there is the related question of how to evaluate such information? What procedures should be adopted to assess relevance and quality? Third, there is the issue of how to draw on academic understanding, expertise and judgement – relating units of information one to another with awareness of theory and consequence.

Thus we have issues capable of stimulating innovation in, for instance, ‘systematic reviews’, but also of fuelling active debate about the limitations of such approaches. Once again, it seems to me that we are caught up in a historic period in which the growth and accessibility of new information is forcing reappraisal of traditional ways of taking stock of accumulated knowledge. Some of the debates are robust.

Working with Harry Torrance and Judy Sebba, TLRP has been contributing to an attempt to find ways forward by running a small series of seminar/workshops on ‘reviewing reviews’. This focuses particularly on fitness for purpose and, accepting the case for procedural transparency, in exploring more clearly what this might mean for different legitimate forms of review.

Once again, this is an example of an issue which, in my view, is being faced and progressed – thanks to the willingness of colleagues to try to find ways forward. Another focus for ‘reflexive activism’?

**Can we engage with the expertise within other disciplines and fields?**

Multidisciplinary research in or about education remains limited, and those in some associated disciplines at present appear to accord a relatively low status work in the field. More researchers from contributing disciplines need to be attracted to study educational issues. Indeed, strengthening inter-disciplinary research on educational issues could offer a lot to basic knowledge and understanding, and could also build capacities in a range of disciplines to tackle educational problems.

A particular case is that of psychology, which once made prominent contributions to education. Reviewing the development of the field, my view is that recent educational research has been most strongly influenced by sociology and by socio-cultural psychology. Indeed, an increasingly comprehensive and convincing understanding of the influence of social and cultural influences on learning and teaching is developing. However, the influence within education of much of contemporary psychology has become minimal. In part, this is probably because of trends within psychology itself, and in part because the attention of educationalists has been drawn to work on aspects of the systemic government
reforms which have taken place in recent years. In the public sphere more broadly, there is a significant and growing interest in cognitive and developmental psychology, brain science and its implications for learning – and educationalists also have to find appropriate ways of responding to this.

In my view therefore, there is a growing intellectual case and practical requirement for the social scientific study of education, with its sociological and socio-cultural insights, to engage further with the various forms of contemporary scientific study of cognition, mind, brain and human development. The issue could also, of course, be expressed the other way round.

**Can we learn from understanding generated in different educational sectors?**

Educational provision tends to be structured in terms of sectors, each of which has its own characteristics and changing research priorities. For example, in relation to young children a major issue concerns the move to integrated children's services and multi-professionalism. In higher education, a particularly pressing contemporary concern is with widening participation.

However, there are also many issues which crop up in all, or many, sectors. TLRP’s ‘big themes’ - context, learner, teacher, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, outcomes, consequences, etc – are designed to facilitate study of these continuities and differences.

Working cross-sectorally is not an easy challenge to meet, and researchers, policy-makers and practitioners each tend to be more comfortable within the boundaries of their sector and its social practices, discourse, priorities and taken-for-granted assumptions. Research expertise is needed which is capable of authentic study within particular sectors whilst also drawing on theory, knowledge and methodologies held in common across sectors. ‘Balkanisation’ of work in each sector is evident, even within a cross-sectoral programme such as TLRP, and is limiting.

**Can we find appropriate ways to research significant educational outcomes?**

This too is not easy, for many of the things which are thought to be important in education are often relatively intangible. However, most educational research in recent decades has focused on processes alone and this has undoubtedly weakened the impact of research in the field.

For this reason, discussion on the identification and measurement of worthwhile educational outcomes (or appropriate indicators of outcomes) has been sustained since the start of TLRP. The technical problems are considerable and have been rehearsed in special issue of *The Curriculum Journal* edited by Mary James (2005). The complexities are increasingly recognised by others - DfES recently invited a TLRP team to facilitate a seminar on this topic and the European Commission has established a working group to investigate further.

I suspect that the need for this sort of work may not be widely accepted within the research community. Studying processes is extremely interesting, as I know myself, but if one also wants to make a difference, then being able to investigate changes and consequences can also make powerful contributions to progress. We need both elements.

This is one of the reasons behind ESRC's new provision for funding very large projects. It raises the possibility of credible bids of up to £5m by multi-disciplinary teams with
sophisticated, multi-method research designs. For education, a clear grip on outcomes (however broadly defined) is likely to be an essential feature of such bids.

**Can we develop more analytic international and comparative research?**

The scope for globalised knowledge in education is as great as in any other field.

However, educational research in most countries across the world has tended to be ‘national’ in its orientation and is often focused on specific ‘problems’ – which is one of the reasons why research assessment panels find the assessment of international standards so difficult. More significantly, the tendency may constrain the accumulation of more analytic forms of knowledge, with relatively little comparison of national cases in relation to key educational issues. In this respect, the potential for ‘home-international’ comparative work is now considerable within the UK and seems likely to be productive for appropriate topics.

More broadly, educational policies and practices appear to be becoming increasingly inter-related across the world, with the influence of OECD being particularly important. The opportunity for international comparative study of key issues is thus growing rapidly.

Arguably at present, the more disciplinary forms of ‘education’ research may be better equipped both theoretically and in terms of their international academic networks, to engage in such work. The challenge of bringing together theoretical and substantive analysis in an international context is considerable, but it is a prize to be grasped. We in the UK may also eventually need to step outside the comfort of the English-speaking world – though perhaps we will simply invite others to join it?

**TRANSFORMATION CHALLENGES – IMPROVING IMPACT?**

Given the range, depth and insight reflected in great deal of educational research, it is a constant frustration that so little of it is apparently used. This issue is now being addressed in many ways and we have moved beyond the time when all responsibility seemed to be attributed to the research community. It is now understood that the social practices, constraints, incentivisation systems and understanding of groups such as civil servants, journalists, practitioners and politicians are also implicated. Further, models of change and impact are becoming increasingly sophisticated.

In my view, the first responsibility of educational researchers must be to the inherent quality of the research itself. Having said that, various strategies may be used to transform the knowledge into more usable forms, to disseminate and increase the chances of impact.

In terms of transformation, TLRP has been experimenting with its Research Briefings, Commentaries on contemporary issues, and its book series Improving Learning and Improving Practice. One group is working on the use of video-assets, another is exploring drama as a means of communicating its findings and we have strong links to Teachers’ TV. TLRP also benefits from regular journalistic support and advice from organisations such us General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) and the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE). In such ways, we are able to offer practical support to project teams. We try to enhance our reach by drawing on our relationships with key user organisations and offering content which they can disseminate through their distribution systems. And we work to maintain networks of key contacts in many organisations across the UK – a frustrating business at times given the turnover of some governmental bodies and roles.
I think we have learned, above all, that such work is complex, time-consuming and skilled. In short, whilst little can be disseminated effectively without supportive academics, there is a real need for more professional infrastructures to support knowledge transformation, dissemination and impact for educational research nationally. Whilst most universities have press officers, very few academic institutions provide specialist support in relation to particular disciplines.

This would require the availability of specialist forms of expertise and may be best organised as a distinct form of provision providing services to and mediating between academic and user communities. Clearly, it would require national funding of some sort drawing across the multiple stakeholders and contributors which make the field so difficult to get a handle on at present. Interestingly, both NERF and the TTA have been thinking about related issues from the point of view of ‘assembling evidence’. Thus we have emergent proposals for a ‘National Evidence Centre’, a ‘National Evidence in Education Portal’ and the provision of a ‘Resource Bank’ for teacher educators. My view is that they are correct in judging that specialist provision is required. How should researchers respond and could UK governments be persuaded to support such provision? Given recent history, it is crucial that any new proposals are legitimated through authentic processes of consultation with relevant stakeholders. For example, the established expertise of the British Education Index is a key resource – despite the insecurity of its funding. Provision which is seen to be ‘independent’ of, or at ‘arms length’, from government and/or political alignment is more likely to succeed in establishing itself among the profession as a whole.

UK OPPORTUNITY – TOWARDS A UK FORUM FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH?

I have briefly reviewed a range of challenges to educational research, and I am well aware of that the drivers of academic life and institutional development may not make it easy to meet these challenges.

The issues I’ve identified are, of course, mainly at what I judge to be at the cutting edge in the development of applied educational research (and I accept that some of the challenges facing the disciplines and practitioner enquiry are somewhat different). Given the UK’s differentiated funding system, it is likely that the larger, research-intensive academic institutions will find it easier than less well-supported organisations to take forward some of these issues in a sustained way. Whilst we may regret this, we have little option but to accept structural realities about resourcing and circumstances, at least in the medium term. A necessary way forward may thus be in identifying and investing in complementary roles whilst also trying to develop strong inter-institutional relationships in different regions – a strategy which is currently being explored in the Welsh context.

One of the other difficulties within the field concerns the level of fragmentation with a plethora of weakly co-ordinated user organisations and agencies. TLRP is unusual in engaging with a significant number of such bodies, and two impressions are regularly reinforced. The first is of the basic integrity and commitment of colleagues working within each part of the education system. The second is of disconnection and lack of knowledge about others which exists, even where organisations may be broadly complementary. Whilst diversity may contribute to innovation, the potential for duplication of effort, waste of resource and confusion is also considerable. What scope, one wonders, might there be for forms of organisation which explicitly attempted to facilitate better communication, understanding and cooperation?

Of course, perspectives on educational research exist in government and academic circles in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales but there is no apparent strategic coordination or effective forum for collective discussion. Whilst England’s NERF has
considered a number of strategic issues in the past, it is nearing the end of its present funding and is now focusing on tangible activity to promote various strategies for continuation or succession.

There does seem to be something of a space emerging here, at a UK-wide level. For this reason, I would suggest that authentic UK organisations such as BERA and ESRC could exercise some leadership in exploring possibilities for facilitating discussion, cooperation and debate about cooperative approaches to some of the ‘challenges’ I have identified in this paper, and others. This is not something which government departments can easily do themselves on a whole-UK basis.

Is it time then, for the academic community to take the initiative and to lead a new stage in the development of educational research? Is there a case for ‘reflexive activism’, developed through a UK research forum, to face the challenges of the sort that I have identified? Has the academic community got the self-confidence to take a lead, engaging openly with user partners, and working constructive towards new forms of high quality educational research?

NOTES

1. The ideas contained in this paper have emerged from interaction with a very large number of people and organisations both within and beyond TLRP. I would like to thank colleagues for the opportunity to engage with them on these issues – which I regard as a significant privilege. I am also grateful to those who commented on the text of my original Educational Review lecture. However, the present paper reflects my personal judgements and no other party should be held responsible.

2. The paper is based on the annual Educational Review Guest Lecture, delivered to an audience of educational researchers 12th October 2005 at the School of Education, University of Birmingham. ‘Taking the Initiative? TLRP and Educational Research’, reviewed TLRP’s developmental strategy of ‘reflexive activism’ and also the major challenges facing professional educational researchers. The latter are the focus of the present paper. A more developed account of TLRP strategies is expected to be published in a special issue of the British Educational Research Journal in 2007.

3. The TLRP Directors’ Team to March 2002 comprised of Charles Desforges and John Kanefsky based in Exeter. When Andrew Pollard became Director, a distributed model was adopted to draw on colleagues from across the UK. These included Mary James, Alan Brown, Kathryn Ecclestone, John Siraj-Blatchford, Miriam David and Steve Baron. The Programme Office has been based in Exeter, Cambridge and London.

REFERENCES


