Improving post-16 learning: the challenges for the Teaching and Learning Research Programme

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Introduction

This paper raises questions about the challenges faced by education researchers in making their research questions, methods and findings both accessible and useful in attempts to improve post-16 learning. Such a challenge is formidable on its own. It becomes more complex in a context of increasing political pressure where policy makers hope that research will not only identify those improvements in learning but that better learning will break cycles of social and individual deprivation (see, for example, Lewis, 2002; DfES, 2002a). Our paper relates these broader challenges and expectations to the specific demands placed on the Economic and Social Science Research Council’s programme of research into teaching and learning (TLRP). This link is important because the TLRP is the biggest programme of research into teaching and learning ever put together in this country and there are therefore high expectations that it will offer sound evidence to a wide range of user groups and audiences about how to improve teaching and learning across all phases and sectors of education and training.

However, the TLRP is only one strand in education research: a large number of research questions, problems and projects in the field of post-16 learning are generated elsewhere by other researchers and organisations. In parallel, there are hopes that TLRP can relate productively to research in Europe. It is therefore possible that current interest in post-16 research is therefore creating dangers of proliferation, duplication and unrealistic expectations about the impact of research.

In this context, the paper aims to:

- identify the aims and remit of the TLRP
- show how TLRP is establishing links with research outside the UK
- identify the main agencies and organisations involved in generating and using post-16 research
- highlight challenges facing post-16 researchers who wish to make their findings have more impact
- identify features that might compromise a research programme.


1. AIMS OF THE TLRP

Impact and transformation of knowledge

The TLRP aims to produce evidence that will enable policy makers, institutional managers, teachers and curriculum designers to improve the quality of teaching and learning across all phases and sectors of education and training. It is the biggest research programme ever funded in education. Once Phase 3 begins in October 2003, the total cost is some £27 million. The DfES paper for the OECD’s review of education research in England suggests through a “combination of income and expenditure sources and inspired guesswork that [overall expenditure on education research] is between £70-£75 million” (DfES, 2002b). Outside the TLRP, the ESRC funds about 5% of this. 90% is carried out in universities. However, although the TLRP is expensive, it is important to note that the new DfES Post-16 Standards Unit will cost about £80 million, and that the combined cost of post-16 OfSTED and the Adult Learning Inspectorate also runs into millions.

The size of the TLRP and its ambitious goals creates high expectations, both in terms of producing robust evidence about teaching and learning but also in terms of improving the quality of education research. This links to high expectations that researchers and the programme’s directors will engage constructively with a wide range of ‘user groups’ and other constituencies in order to consider the implications of the research findings and to translate them into usable, sustainable practices. There are ambitious plans for communication, dissemination and impact that go beyond the usual outputs of academic books and journal articles, and for building research capacity amongst groups and individuals outside universities. These goals arise, in part at least, from strong criticisms that ‘rampant ad hocery’ characterises the dissemination of academic research (Hillage, cited by DfES, 2002b).

Finally, there are assumptions that a programme should offer added value through cumulative insights that go across projects, new ideas about theory and practice and new ways to communicate and disseminate. ‘Transformation’ of knowledge is therefore an aim of the programme as a whole and there is interest in what a coherent programme can offer over and above a series of linked but separate projects (see Pollard, 2002 @www.tlrp.org.uk for a review of the challenges facing TLRP). A further challenge to the notion of impact and transformation emerges from the DfES report for the OECD review of educational research in different countries which explored the extent to which the research and development system within a country is functioning as an effective means for creating, collating and distributing the knowledge on which practitioners and policy makers can draw” (DfES, 2002b). The goal of ‘effectiveness’ is also central to the work of the National Forum of Educational Research.

Knowledge combination and creation

One area where TLRP is attempting to be more inclusive than previous ESRC programmes is through thematic work groups. These cover learning outcomes, learning throughout the life-course, synergy, international comparisons, ICT and capacity building. Groups begin work in 2003 and contain members from within and beyond the programme. An important goal is to combine knowledge from insights generated from within and
beyond the programme, rather than merely focusing upon the familiar goal of knowledge creation.

This is particularly relevant to practitioners as well as researchers because increasing emphasis is given to the ability to create, mediate and translate new knowledge within professionals’ institutional settings. Interest in this goal therefore entails overt recognition that practitioners have a key role in generating new knowledge and then applying it in practice. Teaching is, of course, an example of a profession where there have been high profile attempts to move towards the notion of a research-based profession, where practice is not only informed by research, but where professionals themselves are capable of generating new knowledge about practice.

From a TLRP perspective, this could be linked with an attempt to create a wider community of practice that embraces research as a guide to both policy and action. Professional knowledge can be regarded as a personal synthesis of received occupational knowledge and situational understandings, derived from experiential learning. A growing body of research is beginning to illuminate how knowledge can be transformed further through a process of critical reflection (for example, Hammond and Collins, 1991). As expertise develops, and new contexts are encompassed by the performance of practice, so the processes of research, review and reflection can create new forms of knowledge (Engeström, 1995).

In response to this interest, TLRP is seeking to develop both breadth and depth of knowledge development and to apply this to professional practice. Nevertheless, some models of knowledge transformation show that combining different types of knowledge is often problematic (see, for example, Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). It is the combination of new and existing forms of academic and practical knowledge that represents a particular challenge and TLRP aims to address this directly.

A programme of Post-16 research concerns and interests

The TLRP comprises a number of networks and projects. Phase 1 comprises networks around a particular theme. The network with most relevance to post-16 learning focuses on work-based learning and the factors that help and hinder adults’ ability to learn at work. Such factors include restrictive or expansive learning environments within organisations, the impact of regulation and trades union practices (www.tlrp.org).

Phase 2 comprises projects across primary, secondary and further education. Two have direct relevance to post-16 learning. The first is a large project exploring the factors that affect learning in further education colleges. This is revealing important insights about the very complex interactions between learners' and teachers' histories and 'learning biographies', institutional ethos and culture, group dynamics and expectations, and between the curriculum and student/teacher relationships.

The second is exploring how graduates learn and apply their knowledge as new entrants to different professions and work-based contexts. Both projects suggest that the idea of finding best practice and then translating it into implications for changing practice is not straightforward because learning is very context-specific and located inside particular communities of practice created by the factors summarised here. The difficulty of defining and disseminating best practice, highlighted by these projects, is especially relevant to the
two post-16 inspectorates and the DfES’ Post-16 Standards Unit, launched in 2002. These three bodies are important user groups with which TLRP must engage.

Phase 3 will eventually comprise projects from different post-16 sectors, including work-based learning, professional development, adult and community education and higher education. Final decisions will be made in February 2003 about which of the 46 short-listed bids will be funded to begin research in October 2003. Between 8 and 12 will be funded and a list of titles, outlines and the criteria being used to assess the proposals them, is on the TLRP website (www.TLRP.org.uk).

2. INTERNATIONAL LINKS

The importance of international comparisons

An important focus for facilitating the aim of knowledge combination is the TLRP thematic group on ‘international comparisons in teaching and learning’. This will build synergies between work in the UK within and beyond TLRP and research in other countries. In the past, research programmes saw this as almost exclusively a programme activity. In contrast, a key principle in the TLRP is to involve project teams directly in international activities. The directors’ team is therefore investigating opportunities within the European Sixth Framework Programme to strengthen collaboration at both programme and project levels. A crucial question is how cross-national co-operation adds value to national research on teaching and learning, and the extent to which we want to support the development of a European Research Area.

Some of the broad issues that TLRP might address include:
- identifying key issues for comparative teaching and learning research
- promoting international comparisons or international collaboration
- evaluating the length of time necessary to understand complexity of teaching and learning in different cultural contexts
- comparing research results
- identifying significant national practices
- finding innovative approaches for disseminating research to national and international stakeholders
- identifying new ways to influence policy at different levels

TLRP already has links with national programmes on different aspects of teaching and learning in Finland, the Netherlands and Norway and is investigating collaboration with programmes in Sweden and France. Over the next two to three years, the aim is to stimulate interaction between national learning research programmes in order to accomplish trans-national and trans-disciplinary research co-operation, through activities such as:

- thematic research co-operation
- joint cross-national workshops and conferences
- researcher exchange and the training of young researchers.
Ideas for European collaboration suggest that it could work initially upon a reinterpretation of lifelong learning (broadly defined) and another focus could be upon developments in work-related learning.

Redefining Lifelong Learning

More open access to knowledge makes the capacity to manage and use one’s own learning fundamental to subsequent development and for the quality of life as a whole. However, the differences between situated, context-specific learning and notions of ‘transferable’ learning as a core skill are contested areas of theory and practice. International comparisons might illuminate the following issues:

- **Initial education and training and qualifications systems should develop a positive attitude towards lifelong learning.** However, there is already evidence that the design of learning and assessment in initial education and training may facilitate or hinder life-long learning and affect how the ‘learning careers’ of individuals develop over time and across all sectors and phases of education.

- **Crossing boundaries between institutional and non-institutional learning.** Learning and knowledge are no longer seen as monopolies of educational institutions. There are now many other forums of learning, including working life and work organisations, and people also learn for their own personal and communal motives. Information technology has created a powerful new arena for learning, both in the formal and informal settings of education, through the Internet and virtual communication and learning spaces.

- **The meaning of the social and cultural contexts of learning.** New research is needed in order to discover the best way to make learning a real resource at individual, cultural and societal levels. The family is perhaps the most important fund of cultural resources. Another important learning context is working life and its organisations in addition to school and home.

- **The significance of ‘transfer’ in learning.** Understanding the processes by which knowledge is created, refined, used, transferred and applied are critical challenges for research about learning and there is a need to build upon the growing body of theoretical work in this area.

- **Learning as empowerment.** The functions of educational institutions and cultural expectations may inhibit active learning that is genuinely empowering. The dominant learning culture is essentially passive and based on an outdated transmission model. This means that many individuals are not encouraged to use their whole capacity. Research into how disadvantaged individuals and groups can be engaged actively in learning is therefore important.

Developments in work related learning

While knowledge is still generated in educational institutions, it is also increasingly created and transformed in work places, accessed through media and technology-based environments. International comparisons might help us to understand more in the following areas:
• **Co-configured work, intelligent products: how to develop new ways of working.** A new landscape of work-related learning is emerging in the move towards co-configuration of customer-intelligent products and services (tailored to the needs of specific customers).

• **Modelling the emerging needs of learning in work-based settings.** Research evidence could contribute to the sustainable development of the workplace through new learning strategies relevant to modern working environments. Both individual workers and work teams need to be able to cope with the ever-growing demands of new skills, knowledge creation and innovative productivity initiatives.

• **Intra- and inter-organisational learning.** New learning strategies are required that facilitate the ability of individuals and teams to develop, combine and transform knowledge in and between different organisations and agencies. Examples are, inter-agency and multi-disciplinary working in health care and inter-company working in supply chains.

• **Motivation and commitment in early and late career.** There is a need to understand transitions to and from full-time work over a life-time, including transitions into retirement, and the role of diversity and intergenerational communication this creates. There is also growing concern that occupations crucial for the development of society, especially in social and health care and education, are losing the competition for the best recruits. As the value structure of society changes and competition for the best people increases, research has to address the challenges.

• **Designing work-related learning and assessment to facilitate life-long learning.** It is important to broaden and deepen knowledge about how to align processes of work-related learning and assessment with commitments to support life-long learning and active knowledge transformation.

These concerns enable education researchers to pose research questions as dilemmas that relate to learning in working life:

• Can changing socio-political conditions support social partnerships and negotiated arrangements in a context of increasing market regulation?
• Can a focus upon educational and training (and qualifications) systems, provisions and targets co-exist with a desire for greater individualisation?
• Do expanding academic routes lead to over-qualification or key competencies?
• Are the routinisation of service work and the enrichment of other areas leading to a new polarisation of skills?
• Are social and communication skills and a positive self-identity legitimate objects for working life preparation?
• In contexts where emotional overload and burn-out and increasing, might learning be seen as an extra burden?
• To what extent does continuous education and learning remain principally a ‘shadow system’?
• Is motivation a scarce resource as work becomes more individualised?
• How are boundaries between work as home and home as work becoming more blurred?
• What trends are there in panoptic and intimate control of work behaviour and learning?
• The work force is increasingly multi-cultural, but is polarisation occurring here too?
• To what extent is formal learning a genuinely integrating mechanism or an excluding one?
• Can learning foster positive identities and a sense of belonging?

Influencing European policy makers

While the focus so far has been upon what international comparisons can do for TLRP, it is perhaps important to consider whether TLRP should aspire to the shaping of future international, or at least European, research on teaching and learning. For example, TLRP’s goals for dissemination and research impact suggest that one aim of collaboration, rather than just comparison, is to encourage national and European research policy makers to pay special attention to the role of learning in forming the European Research Area (and perhaps a European Knowledge Society). Comparative research can show how the latest research results could inform learning practices in a variety of settings and contexts. However, this could have unintended consequences by focusing attention upon short-term results.

3. AGENCIES AND ORGANISATIONS IN POST-16 RESEARCH

Growing research interest and activity

The possibilities for European links in making research both more coherent and more influential have parallels in the UK where a growing number of post-16 agencies and organisations commission and use research. Better knowledge about the research they use or reject and about the ways in which they commission projects, is crucial for education researchers because much of the debate about pressing concerns in educational research is still heavily dominated by compulsory schooling. It is also necessary to develop better knowledge about the post-16 sector across the UK and to appreciate the differences in national cultures, ethos and traditions of educational research and its links to policy and practice in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

It is a sign of the ESRC’s commitment to raising the profile of post-16 research that two of the directors’ team are post-16 specialists in further, adult and community education and work-based learning. The TLRP researchers and directors need to understand more about the work, cultures and aims of a number of organisations who might use and commission research, including the DfES (and especially its newly-created post-16 Standards Unit), the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), the National Institute of Adult and Community Education (NIACE) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

These organisations all identify important research questions, respond to government imperatives and initiatives, publicise research and help improve practice. For example, the DfES has a research centre on the Wider Benefits of Learning (www.learningbenefits.net) and the National Research Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (http:ioe.ac.uk). The latter has a budget of £8 million. The LSDA’s Learning and Skills Research Centre, funded by the DfES has a number of important projects including evaluations of the extent
of mixed age teaching and learning in FE colleges and the impact and implications of research into thinking skills, informal learning and learning styles (www.lsda.org.uk/research). The LSDA also commissions projects and produces research findings on other areas of post-16 education and training and publishes a research journal four times a year. NIACE is renowned for its own research journal, Studies in the Education of Adults, a professional journal, ‘Adults Learning’ and also undertakes an array of projects in the fields of family learning, pedagogy and assessment and community learning, amongst others (www.niace.org.uk).

Both LSDA and NIACE have a flourishing output of reports and publications and both agencies command high levels of respect with different groups of practitioners, institutional managers and policy makers at different levels. They are also highly committed to the TLRP. Meanwhile, the National Forum for Educational Research aims to identify research priorities and try to predict future challenges that researchers should address. In addition, the LSC and its 47 local councils commission and use research and many local LSCs have their own research managers, mainly focusing on labour market trends and needs. We need to know more about what research the LSCs use and value, and again, how academic research and the TLRP might relate to the LSC’s remit.

Two organisations that also use and produce research are the two post-16 inspectorates, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and OfSTED. Both produce evaluation data and OfSTED has also commissioned more wide ranging research in the past, not least the infamous ‘Tooley’ report which criticised the quality and usefulness of much educational research (Tooley and Darby, 1998). OfSTED has an official dedicated to research. They also make pronouncements about effective practice in teaching, learning and assessment but it is not clear whether inspectors draw on academic research evidence. Inspectors therefore have a huge impact on ideas about best practice in teaching and learning and on how to improve it. Both inspectorates employ a large number of part-time inspectors from diverse areas of the post-16 sector. ALI has recently expanded into adult and community education, bringing another large and complex sector into the focus of research into teaching and learning. Full and part-time post-16 inspectors are therefore a key and overlooked audience for research into teaching and learning.

Finally, the new DfES post-16 Standards Unit, headed by Jane Williams, ex-principal of Wolverhampton College, is committed to identifying and disseminating best practice. Its consultation conference in October 2002 showed that ideas about best practice are heavily influenced by inspectors’ pronouncements. Yet, if the unit and its staff (seconded from colleges, inspectorates and other parts of the post-16 sector, together with a large number of part-time consultants) are to have credibility with practitioners, it will need to engage with other research about policy and practice.

This summary of post-16 organisations shows that TLRP has to know a great deal more about these post-16 bodies, their internal and external publications through which research findings might be disseminated. However, there are a large number of other bodies, such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, awarding bodies, professional associations and teaching unions such as the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), teacher training groups such as the large post-16 committee of the Universities’ Council of Teacher Education and designers of the outcome-based ‘standards’ for further education, FENTO. In addition, influential bodies such as the
Assessment Reform Group have previously focused on schools but are now expanding their remit to post-16 education.

4. USING AND ENGAGING WITH RESEARCH

Criteria and processes

In addition to the need to know more about how individuals and organisations use research, what people read and why, what they respond to and why, but also the barriers to engaging with a large body of research into adult learning.

Post-16 research priorities in TLRP illuminate important comparisons with research carried out by other agencies. The criteria that the ESRC and the steering committee for the programme use to assess bids, and to carry out the difficult task of selecting from bids of an extremely high quality, illuminate some important differences, not least that the criteria are made public (see the TLRP website). It is interesting to note that the ESRC used them for the first round of short-listing and encouraged the 46 bidders to use them in improving their final bid. In doing this, we were responding to the research evidence by Paul Black and Dylan William (amongst others) that good formative feedback and good knowledge of the assessment criteria, raises the quality of work produced.

Bidders to TLRP have to identify very clear research questions rooted explicitly in a wider body of related research, and to show how their bid both contributes to and builds upon theory, knowledge and better practice. They must also show how their project will build capacity outside the team of professional researchers, how they will communicate and disseminate research and how their methodology will operationalise their questions. Crucially, they must show how their project will add value to a programme with very strong aims for improving practice. Within the broad specification of the programme, they have free rein to identify the most pressing research questions or problems that they believe need to be addressed but there is no doubt that they have to show commitment to being in a programme. The strong demand for good communication and dissemination plans has led to some imaginative ideas for working locally, regionally and nationally with a diverse range of users and other audiences, including media and broadcasters. Lastly, the timescale of the TLRP enables a fairly long preparation period for bids and the possibility of large scale projects that last over a number of years, typically 3-4.

Other agencies have different degrees of scope to identify their own questions or to interpret current interests in their own way. Instead, agencies with direct government funding often have to set research agendas much more closely around specific policy imperatives, with an emphasis on producing practical outcomes and useable evidence in short timescales. Specifications are often constructed in detail, with tight deadlines for bidding and variable practice in how far the criteria for judging them are public.

Pressures and priorities

The way in which agencies identify research questions and defined criteria for selecting bids to address them, create different pressures. First, while different agencies have the same concerns to improve post-16 learning, academic researchers tend to seek and explain complexity while other agencies need quick answers to political imperatives. As the research interests in Phase 3 bids and post-16 projects in phases 1 and 2 of TLRP
show, TLRP relates directly to many of the projects that DfES, LSDA and NIACE commission in areas such as educational disadvantage, motivation, participation, barriers to learning etc. Yet, pressure for quick practical answers is not compatible with longer time scales to produce findings, reviewed through academic peer processes before publication and surrounded by caveats like ‘it all depends’ or ‘you can’t look at x without taking account of y, z and w’. Even on the same topic, researchers can appear to be talking past each other.

Second, in contrast to only a few years ago when post-16 research had both low status and little visibility, there is now an enormous amount of research going on amongst diverse agencies and researchers (DfES, 2002a). An increasing number of post-16 researchers working for the DFES are in areas such as economics, welfare and social policy. Not only is there a danger that projects and initiatives replicate each other, or, conversely, contradict each other, but the task of mapping post-16 research is in itself a daunting one, before trying to make sense of it all. This problem was highlighted in Brown and Keep’s review of vocational education research in the UK (Brown and Keep, 2000) and is made more acute by the goals for European links outlined above. An important goal for the TLRP is therefore to relate findings and their implications to other recent research, and also to past ESRC programmes such as The Learning Society, The 16-19 Initiative and the Youth and Identity programme.

Third, there are political tensions if academic research findings seem to contradict policy goals and imperatives, or to suggest that they are the wrong ones or that they cannot be achieved. Such criticism can be read as unhelpful, negative or even destructive (see Edwards, 2000). Nevertheless, a constructive challenge was offered to academic researchers in 2000 by the then-Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, who acknowledged that sometimes education research might offer evidence that contradicted policy and that policy makers had to listen to that too. In a similar vein, there has to be space for researchers to think outrageously, or merely differently and controversially and to question assumptions on all sides. Without this recognition, there is a danger of creating policy-based evidence rather than evidence-based policy.

A further impetus to the principle of constructive critical engagement with policy is the need to define policy makers inclusively in order to include not merely different levels of the system but also policy makers in opposition parties and lobbying groups.

Finally, traditional formats for academic research do not lend themselves to easy digestion of issues, ideas or findings, let alone into a bullet point list of ‘10 things to do on Monday morning’. Pressures from policy makers to produce findings in political timescales also mean that traditions of peer review of academic research before publication are under severe pressure. For many academics, this is an important part of academic integrity and by-passing peer review in order to produce quick findings presents a difficult ethical dilemma. Such pressures lead to different views about whether it is academic researchers’ job to write one page summaries of complex ideas or newspaper articles or to popularise their findings. These views, together with lack of time and lack of familiarity amongst non-academic audiences with academic language and formats are therefore real pressures with which all researchers interested in improving practice and policy have to engage.
5. CREATING A RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Possible features of a programme

The complexity of pressures placed on TLRP suggest that it might be worth probing in more depth what makes an ambitious body of work around a particular theme a 'programme'. The paper shows that there is a danger of duplication, reinventing the wheel and confusion about how to use the findings, as well as disagreement about what counts as worthwhile research or 'evidence' for better policy and practice. In order to counter this danger, a programme such as TLRP could perform an important role in identifying the values, concepts and features that make a programme as opposed to a linked set of projects or initiatives.

In the 1970s, Imre Lakatos articulated features of 'progressive' or 'degenerating' scientific research programmes. They were applied to social science and education research by Phillips (1983) and specifically in post-16 education in a policy-based analysis of the confusing array of projects, run by different researchers in various settings, that surrounded the controversial development of Advanced General National Vocational Qualifications between 1992 and 1998 (Ecclestone, 1998).

According to Lakatos, a programme can comprise disparate researchers in diverse places working around a theme or question. These researchers may not regard their work as contributing overtly to a programme but are, nevertheless, united by agreement about the key questions, principles and values that the programme is trying to address. An important development in the TLRP is that its director, Professor Andrew Pollard, presents an overt moral purpose to unify the programme and to articulate its overriding principles and values (see Pollard, op cit). He focuses these around a commitment to rational debate designed to advance knowledge and practice in the cause of social and educational progress. He also acknowledges the need to engage with seemingly intractable disagreements in social science between different methodological and value positions but promotes values of respect and dialogue. It is not clear whether researchers within the TLRP agree with, or have internalised, these commitments.

In a Lakatosian programme, agreement about questions, values and principles leads researchers to identify 'hard core' elements and principles that must be protected against dissent and attack from rival programmes. These might comprise public adherence to a particular theoretical perspective or a commitment to particular values. The hard core elements are surrounded by a belt of 'expendable' elements that can be debated and fought over, and if necessary, traded to preserve the hard core ones. The third feature of a Lakatosian programme is a willingness to seek out and engage with dissent, rivalry and even hostility. Direct engagement with rival programmes improves a programme and makes it progressive. While there is a commitment in the TLRP to engage constructively with problems in education research generally, and with those raised directly by the programme, it does not yet go so far as to actively seek out dissent and hostility. In addition, serious dissent over values, principles and processes might arise inside a programme. Ways of dealing with this may therefore emerge in an ad hoc, implicit way rather than in the rational, overt ways Lakatos implies.

According to Lakatos, a programme is progressive when it displays these features and degenerates when it does not. For example, if education research becomes too compliant...
in turning practice into a mirror of policy goals, dissent becomes difficult. Yet, if research does not engage constructively with policy, then dissent and debate amongst researchers become an irrelevant minority interest. Similarly, if researchers within a programme as well as outside it cannot debate opposing positions, values and interests, a programme becomes complacent and even self-serving.

There are a number of objections to trying to define a programme, let alone in using Lakatos’ ideas. First, many social science researchers are wary of attempts to identify principles and values or to define ‘hard core’ elements, even if they commit themselves to working in a programme. Indeed, there are powerful philosophical objections to such attempts as well as traditions of academic freedom and individual working. Second, the notion of engaging with dissent in order to defend hard core principles may be easier to accommodate in scientific programmes where political pressures might be less strong or where images of rationality and experimentation are still strong. In education, not only are there divisions between different methodologies and philosophies, but criticism of principles, processes and values from within the research community is sometimes seen as a breaking of professional trust. This makes it difficult to gain agreement that the pursuit of active engagement with dissent might constitute a progressive feature of a programme.

Despite the problems, Lakatos’ ideas might at least be a starting point for discussing how researchers within a programme like TLRP might make more impact in a complex post-16 research field with diverse organisations using, commissioning and doing research. They might also enable researchers in the TLRP and the ESRC itself to consider how TLRP differs from other high profile education programmes funded by ESRC during the 1980s and 1990s. At the very least, the notion of a ‘programme’ raises important questions about coherence, terms of engagement, mutual and conflicting interests even if ‘progressive’ and ‘degenerating’ research might be two labels too far!

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