

Mapping the ripples:

An evaluation of TLRP's research capacity building strategy

The current shortage of young, skilled researchers within educational research has consequences across the UK. Evaluating how the TLRP succeeded in making a significant impact upon the professional development of researchers provides valuable insights into the practices and types of support that most effectively build research capacity. While focusing on educational research, the findings and recommendations may also have resonance for other academic areas that are also facing impending shortages in research expertise.

- Research capacity building in Education is particularly complex due to the diverse characteristics, professional backgrounds, and career aspirations of the workforce.



Professional development opportunities need to be responsive to the diversity of the workforce and available throughout research careers. They should not only target beginning researchers.

- Research projects which successfully provide expansive learning environments contribute most positively to the capacity building of their research staff.



Research staff should be supported in engaging with Educational research activities and communities beyond the context of their individual research project.

- There is a large variation in the provision of professional opportunities and support for research staff, both between institutions and across research teams.



Inequities are created that are detrimental to the overall capacity of the research workforce. This might be addressed through research projects making explicit commitments to the professional development of their research staff at the point of application and throughout the research process.

The research Background and rationale

There are widespread concerns over the capacity available within the field of Education to deliver high quality and relevant research. Recent demographic evidence (Mills et al., 2006) has focused attention on the ageing profile of the research workforce and there are systemic weaknesses in some methodological areas. While there is recognition that existing expertise needs to be shared more effectively across the field and through drawing upon expertise from other disciplines, there are no easy answers as to how this can be achieved.

Building research capacity within Education is complex. In part, this is related to the diversity of the research workforce: many educational researchers have had previous careers in practice or policy. While this diversity is a strength of the field, it also has a repercussions for considering the most effective research capacity building strategies for these researchers. The working conditions of research staff, with the majority employed on fixed term contracts, also constrain possibilities for capacity building.

From its outset in 1998, the Teaching and Learning Research Programme has identified research capacity building as one of its principle purposes. Formal provision for research capacity building was provided through a range of Programme wide structures including: conferences, the Research Capacity Building Network, Meeting of Minds Fellowships, and the development of on-line resources. Each individual research project was expected to develop research capacity building activities and to record these in the project's annual and End of Award reports.

Between 2007 and 2008, the TLRP's impact upon building the research capacity of research staff in Education was evaluated by the Mapping the Ripples project. The overall aim of this research project was to investigate how people had utilised the research capacity afforded through their research work on TLRP projects, leading to a greater understanding of the nature, extent and perceived value of this capacity building strategy. Consideration was given to how the legacy of TLRP might be enhanced in future research programmes and capacity building activities.

The research project

The Mapping the Ripples project evaluated the TLRP's capacity building strategy in relation to the experiences of research staff and project directors. An

initial literature review and analysis of project annual reports highlighted the slipperiness of the term 'capacity building'.

Data collection focused upon understanding the characteristics, working practices and career aspirations of the TLRP projects' research staff, and the impact that working on a TLRP project had had upon individuals' professional, career and intellectual development. All research staff who had worked on TLRP research projects were invited to complete an on-line survey. A separate, but complementary, survey was distributed to project directors to provide their perspectives on capacity building and their rationale for their project's working practices. From the initial thematic and statistical analysis of survey responses, an interview sample and an interview schedule were developed. Twelve researchers were interviewed, and their range illustrated some of the diversity of researchers, institutions, and evaluative judgements.

Evans et al's expansive-restrictive framework of workplace learning features (Evans et al., 2006) was used as an analytical tool to help make sense of the different activities related by researchers to the development of their capacity building. Evan et al's work explores how workplaces enable or constrain workers' learning: richer learning is found where the environment is more expansive. Their findings are recontextualised by this project in Figure 1.

Key findings and emerging issues

The capacity building structures supported by the TLRP tended to be very positively evaluated by research staff. The Programme was valued by researchers for being an inclusive, approachable and supportive organisation, and researchers generally felt that the TLRP had had a significant impact upon their professional development. Involvement with the TLRP

had influenced researchers' ways of doing research, contributed positively to individuals' professional development, provided significant training opportunities, and created and developed educational research networks which would not have otherwise existed.

While the overall Programme tended to be positively evaluated, some researchers were critical of their individual project's working practices; in some cases, researchers felt that their research project had been detrimental to their professional development. Those research projects which encouraged and supported expansive learning environments had contributed most effectively to the capacity building of their research staff.

(1) Interpersonal support

For some research staff, key people provided support and informal mentoring, particularly in relation to helping researchers reflect upon their own research practice. The Meeting of Minds Fellowships enabled a formalisation and increased recognition of these types of relationships.

(2) Supported engagement with multiple communities of practice

Linking closely with interpersonal support were the roles that some key people took in acting as 'gatekeepers', facilitating introductions to key people at conferences, social events and within research settings. Supported engagement also took place through 'signposting' relevant resources. Education is a large and fragmented field, the provision of this kind of direction was valued.

(3) Multidimensional model of expertise

The most positive evaluations emerged from researchers who felt that they were valued and supported within their research teams. These evaluations contrasted with those research staff who felt that they were positioned at the "bottom of the work hierarchy". Researchers who felt

EXPANSIVE	RESTRICTIVE
Interpersonal support from more senior project members / members of institution	Limited interpersonal support
Supported engagement with multiple communities of practice	Limited exposure to multiple communities of practice
Multidimensional model of expertise with diverse skills of entire research team valued	Hierarchical valuing of skills, with privileging of some team members
Balance between project outputs and researcher's own professional development	Prioritisation of project outputs over professional development needs of individuals
Access and encouragement to attend off-the-job training.	Limited access to off-the-job training
Ongoing commitment to researchers' futures beyond the completion of the project	Abrupt ending to the project with no further investment in research staff.
Attention to the longer-term needs of sustaining and developing Educational Research as an academic field	Attention to the research project in isolation from wider concerns over Educational Research.

Figure 1: Aspects of research projects, drawing on the expansive-restrictive continuum

valued felt better able to develop their professional identity: they had a greater sense of belonging to their community of researchers.

(4) Balance between project's outputs and researcher's professional development

While some research teams focused primarily on the delivery of research outputs, other research teams generated a balance between the longer term professional development needs of research staff and the shorter term aims of the research projects. Attention to researchers' professional development is an important aspect of building a sustainable research base for the future. Research projects do not only contribute to the field through the delivery of evidence, but also through developing a workforce for the future.

(5) Access and encouragement to attend off-the-job training

Engaging with off-the-job training provided both learning opportunities and engagement with communities beyond the confines of one's project. This is formative to developing the field as a whole.

(6) Ongoing commitment to researchers' future

Central to many researchers' positive evaluations was the sense that a more senior colleague had an appreciation of the expertise which the individual currently had and a sense of the potential that person might realise in the future. This potential was not always self-evident to the researcher, except in retrospect.

(7) Attention to longer-term needs of the discipline

Delivering the outputs from a research project and developing the capacity of the academic field of Education operate with different time scales. Most research projects are short-term with a finite endpoint. However, the benefits of building researchers' capacity would have benefits for the future of the field.

The use of the expansive-restrictive continuum allows focus to be given both to the need for capacity building structures and to the capacity building possibilities of research projects' working practices. Interpersonal support of research staff facilitates this process, increasing the impact of these activities upon the individual's research capacity. While the provision of structures provides opportunities for capacity building, it is only through supported engagement with these structures that capacity is effectively built.

Major implications

The Educational Research workforce is diverse and this raises particular problems in thinking about 'research capacity'. On average, researchers working on TLRP projects had 7 years' research experience. It was not possible for us to satisfactorily categorise the diversity of research staff involved with TLRP projects: they have a diversity of professional and personal backgrounds, a broad range of research experience, theoretical knowledge and expertise, varying levels of confidence, and different aspirations for the future. A major criticism made of the RCBN provision was its tacit assumption that most researchers were 'early career' researchers. Respondents recommended that a wider range of courses should have been made available which addressed the needs of researchers at all points in their career. Given the diversity of staff, any capacity building structures that are put in place need to be responsive to the individual's needs, interests and aspirations. Structures also need to be well-publicised and effectively mediated by project directors.

A range of outcomes were valued by research staff. For example, one practitioner researcher commented that *"I think that my TLRP experience was very, very positive. It caused me to reflect back on where I was and to accept that I am really happy in FE, that I don't want to be a lecturer in HE."* Building research capacity is not just about building the next cohort of professors and senior academics, it can also relate to the building of one's own personal capacity to engage with research and practice.

This research has shown that there is a need, within research capacity building strategies, for a balance between providing the structures to provide opportunities for formal learning and networking, and the provision of support and encouragement for research staff to engage effectively with these structures. There is also a need for a balance between short-term needs and longer term needs. In developing strategies for building research capacity, it might be useful to ask what is valued by whom, and to generate a balance between the different needs of research staff, research projects, institutions and departments, and the field of Educational Research more widely.

Current research working conditions limit opportunities for capacity building. Instability of tenure can, and frequently does, act against the professional development of the workforce and can limit the quality of researchers' work.

The lack of definitional clarity around 'capacity building' is problematic in developing strategies to address this. If effective strategies are to be developed, there is the need to have more coherence and agreement of the issue. The inequity of provision across research projects is caused, in part, by different understandings of the nature and purpose of capacity building.

Further information

Further information on the project and copies of research reports and conference presentations can be downloaded from the project website at www.tlrp.org/mappingtheripples

Findings were presented at BERA 2008. See Fowler, Z. (2008) 'Personalising capacity: how might we strategise for the capacity building of researchers?' at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/174546.doc>

A more detailed evaluation of the RCBN activities has been published: Rees, G., Baron, S., Boyask, R. and Taylor, C. (2007) 'Research-capacity building, professional learning and the social practices of educational research' in *British Educational Research Journal* Vol.33, No 5, pp. 761-779

References

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The warrant

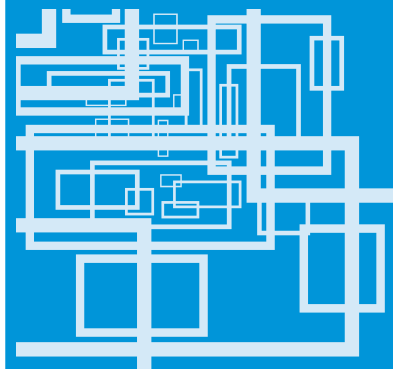
The conclusions of this project have emerged from an ongoing dialogue between data collection, existing literature, and emerging findings. Similar evaluations have not previously been carried out in this field. Conceptually, analytical frameworks have been developed from work on expansive learning environments (Evans et al, 2006). These frameworks have been refined through analysis of the data, conversations with interviewees, and through conference presentations and feedback from research staff and project directors.

The MTR project developed and piloted three online survey tools which elicited both quantitative and qualitative data. 232 TLRP researchers and 303 TLRP project directors were invited to complete the surveys, with respective response rates of 40% and 21%. A response rate for the non-TLRP researchers could not be calculated due to a 'snowball' dissemination method that was used to source respondents in university education departments. Quantitative data were analysed statistically to describe demographic and experiential aspects of this population.

Qualitative data was also gathered in the form of semi-structured interviews with 12 TLRP researchers who had previously completed the online survey. Interviewees were selected to illustrate some of the diversity of Institution (according primarily to RAE rating), demographic profile of research staff, and evaluations of TLRP project experiences. Documentary evidence was gathered from TLRP annual project reports and TLRP End of Award reports. All qualitative data were thematically analysed. Co-authorship network diagrams were also generated through analysis of project outputs, and these were analysed to show trends in working practices and publication strategies across projects.

All participants within this project gave voluntary informed consent for their involvement, and the identities of all respondents have been protected throughout the research project.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves some 90 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and the Technology Enhanced Learning phase will continue to 2012.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is 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, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research informed policy and practice.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

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