

Summary of NFER's Review of TLRP

At the mid-point of TLRP's lifecycle, ESRC commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake a mid-term review of the Programme. This work was carried out by a team of three NFER researchers (Dr Peter Rudd, Dr Mark Rickinson and Mr Matthew Walker), supported by two consultants (Professor Sally Tomlinson and Professor Lesley Saunders). Extracts from the report follow:

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.

Quality of Research

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. With regard to relevance and utility, the feedback from policy-makers and practitioners was generally positive. Questions were raised, however, about the selection of the project portfolio, and whether it fully met the needs of users. It was also suggested that the Programme could have been stronger in terms of engagement with different disciplines and development of new research designs.

User Engagement

There is evidence of considerable progress in the area of 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.

Research Synergies and Added Value

The majority of respondents who commented upon these aspects of the Programme made positive comments, reflecting a view that it was useful to link up with other researchers and to see the overlaps and lessons learned from

other projects. Cross-Programme themes were being promoted appropriately, but a minority of respondents took a view that more could be done in this area. The Programme was seen to be adding value in terms of encouraging a broader identity for the research work, offering support via 'critical friends', and promoting the work to policy makers and others.

Capacity Building

There was broad agreement from respondents that capacity building should be a key focus within educational research, and many interviewees expressed positive views about the benefits arising from the multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional nature of their projects. There was some evidence, with respect to involvement in RCBN activities and training, that Programme members still preferred to develop skills and competencies in areas in which they were already familiar; consolidating rather than broadening their expertise.

Impact on Policy and Practice

The review team found that the Programme has a strong emphasis on dissemination and impact. The Directors' Team was seen to be working skilfully and sensitively to forge connections between the research and policy communities. There were a number of examples of TLRP projects having impacted on teaching and learning practices, though this kind of impact tended to be quite 'localised'. In the realm of policy, there were similar indications of projects having made significant contributions to the policy process in specific areas. In terms of possible improvements, respondents suggested a stronger dissemination focus on: practitioners beyond those participating within particular projects; policy-makers' awareness of the Programme; and research funding organisations.

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