

ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme: Overview

TLRP is a major developmental initiative focused on teaching and learning. It also aspires to enhance the quality of Educational research more generally. This briefing note takes stock of TLRP's contribution.

Impact on the field of Education

TLRP has engaged a high proportion, by no means all, of the best education researchers in the UK. With applications to its three major Phase competitions involving over 2000 individual researchers, approximately 400 are involved in the 50+ projects and thematic initiatives that have been funded.

The large scale of many TLRP projects supports more sophisticated research designs than have previously been typical of Education and is providing experience in complex project management. The Programme includes researchers from a number of disciplines. There has been progress in the combined use of quantitative and qualitative methods and in attention to the relationship between research design and the nature of justifiable warrants. Capacity building work remains extremely important.

In addition to conventional academic concerns for scientific quality, the Programme emphasises user engagement, relevance, capacity building, dissemination and impact. These issues have been strongly represented in selection, reporting and evaluation criteria and are prominent in all aspects of Programme provision. Research teams are developing many innovative approaches to these issues. Nevertheless, the strongest driver of academic focus remains the UK system of research quality assessment – the RAE.

A significant number of research users have been directly engaged through project applications and many contribute to ongoing research work. Those involved tend to be innovative individuals representing more research-aware organisations. Whilst TLRP can claim to have developed excellent relationships with many research-orientated leaders, given the scale of educational provision, the depth of this penetration into user communities should not be over-emphasised. There is a great deal more to be done if research such as TLRP's is to really inform policy and practice.

Funding

The total TLRP budget is approximately £31m – some £3.5m per annum for its nine year duration. An initial £10.5m was provided by HEFCE, including a top-slice of the Education QR following the 1996 RAE outcome. Additional sums were provided by the DfES (£1m) Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government and Northern Ireland Executive. In 2001, a further £10.5m was added by HEFCE to extend the Programme into post-compulsory education sectors, with parallel contributions from the DfES, Scotland and Wales. DfES has also provided £0.5m to fund linked research fellowships for practitioners. The Scottish Executive and ESRC co-funded four 'Scottish Extension' projects. Further funding for 'Welsh Extensions' and 'Northern Ireland Extensions' was made available in 2004 and, more recently, HEFCE allocated £2m for projects on widening participation in Higher Education. ESRC has provided additional support for external relations and international work. Many other organisations have indicated a willingness to consider providing support for dissemination and impact activities of various sorts.

Governance

TLRP is managed by ESRC on behalf of HEFCE and other funders, including DfES. A Steering Committee with user, academic and funder representation oversees the strategic direction of the Programme. The Steering Committee Chair is Professor Robert Burgess (Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester). The Director is Professor Andrew Pollard (University of London) supported by a distributed, part-time team of Associate Directors with specialist expertise. These are: Mary James (Deputy Director), Steve Baron, Alan Brown, Miriam David and John Siraj-Blatchford.

The Programme benefits from ESRC's public esteem, its commitment to relevance, quality and independence and its administrative infrastructure. Within ESRC, the Programme reports to the Strategic Research Board.

Focus

HEFCE/ESRC contracts state the TLRP mission as being: 'to promote high quality research on education, focused on improving outcomes for all types of student and designed to be relevant to the practice of teaching and learning'. This focus on teaching and learning outcomes constitutes a sub-set of the wide range of issues addressed by the field of Education as a whole. There are thus many important educational issues that fall outside the Programme's remit. Other key priorities include the involvement of practitioners in contributing to and using research, the development of research capacity in the field, and collaboration between disciplines and sectors.

Form

TLRP was established as an ESRC programme – a coordinated network of projects. All projects address the Programme aims, but they do so in wide-ranging ways. Funding decisions have been informed by rigorous peer review by users and academics. The portfolio of projects reflects the distribution of high quality applications and the Steering Committee's judgement of strategic priorities amongst these. An Associated Project scheme enhances this selection. Coherence and added value are being achieved through the progressive use of cross-Programme thematic initiatives – including six Thematic Seminar Series and a number of commissioned reviews. As the Programme matures, in addition to routine dissemination of project findings, there will be special initiatives to pro-actively engage with contemporary issues of policy and practice in relation to teaching and learning.

Scheduling

TLRP is now a nine-year programme, with research, dissemination and impact work between 2000 and 2009.

- Phase I networks began in 2000 and end in 2003. There are 4 of these.
- Phase II projects began in 2001 and all end by 2005. There are 9 of these.
- Scottish Extension projects began in 2003 and all end by 2005. There are 4 of these.
- Phase III projects begin in 2003/4 and all end by 2008. There are 12 of these.
- Welsh and Northern Irish Extension projects are scheduled to start in 2004 and end by 2007.
- Widening participation in HE projects will start in 2006 and end in 2008.
- Research capacity building initiatives run from 2002-2004 and 2005-2008.

Most of the early projects are focused on schools sectors and all of the later projects address post-compulsory issues. Activity in 2009 will focus on maximising impact and on thematic analysis.

Users

From their inception, all TLRP projects have been required to work very closely with practitioners and other research users. The value of this is increasingly appreciated. During 2003/4, 'TLRP Showcase' events were held for users in Westminster, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. Selected 'key user' organisations have been actively engaged by the Directors' Team. Such organisations have provided a great deal of support in project selection and establishment, and are seen as crucial partners in maximising dissemination and impact. Many are represented on the Programme's Steering Committee and participate in other activities. Key user organisations engaged to date include:

- TTA, QCA, OFSTED, NCSL, GTC, LSDA, HEFCE, HEA, CIPD, NIACE, DTI
- Department for Education and Skills (eg: Analytical Services, Standards and Effectiveness and Innovations Units); Scottish Executive (Education Department and Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department); Welsh Assembly Government (Department for Education and Training); Northern Ireland Executive (Department for Education, Department for Employment and Learning)
- Parliamentarians with education interests and Parliamentary education teams from the Labour Party, Conservative Party and Liberal Democrat Party; the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills

All UK schools, colleges, universities, etc. and over 5000 other organisations with educational interests or responsibilities, are presently registered on TLRP's growing database. Registered individuals receive newsletters and, as research findings are produced, will be sent targeted Research Briefings and be invited to participate in relevant events

For more information: contact TLRP's Director Professor Andrew Pollard, a.pollard@ioe.ac.uk, or visit www.tlrp.org