

TLRP's Research on Widening Participation in Higher Education

As a part of TLRP, the ESRC has commissioned 7 research projects based in England to look at the theme of widening participation in, and fair access to, higher education. The Higher Education Funding Council for England provided circa £2m funding to support these projects, drawn from 65 proposals. These successful projects will begin in 2006 and run for about 2 years, finishing in early 2008.

Aims and Scope:

The aim of this phase is to support high quality innovative research with the potential to enhance understanding, and inform and/or underpin future policy, practice and outcomes relating to widening participation in, and fair access to, higher education (HE) in England.

Widening participation is taken to mean extending and enhancing access to HE experiences of people from so-called under-represented and diverse social backgrounds, families, groups and communities and positively enabling such people to participate in and benefit from HE. People from socially disadvantaged families and/or deprived geographical areas, including deprived remote, rural and coastal areas or from families that have no prior experience of HE may be of key concern. Widening participation is also concerned with diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability and social background in particular HE disciplines, modes and institutions. It can also include access and participation across the ages, extending conceptions of learning across the life course, and in relation to family responsibilities, particularly by gender and maturity.

HE across the spectrum: HE is also conceptualised broadly in terms of pedagogies or practices of learning and teaching and may include delivery of HE programmes from sub-degree to doctoral level. These may be delivered in various types of institution, including teaching-intensive universities, research-intensive universities, Further Education colleges offering higher education, HE institutions offering further education, and HE colleges & distance learning.

The 7 successful research proposals range from those giving consideration to various innovative aspects of policy and practice around developments to widen participation in HE to reflective and personal pedagogies and practices around teaching and learning to enhance both the experiences of diverse learners and learner outcomes.

One of the successful projects led by Dr Anna Vignoles of the Institute of Education aims to undertake a quantitative cohort analysis of widening participation in HE, using an innovative linkage of newly available data sets and sophisticated modelling techniques to examine determinants of entry into and progress within HE, which offers the promise of creating a definitive baseline study of both full and part time undergraduate students.

One of the other projects also aims to study students as learners largely through more qualitative methods. It focuses on the socio-cultural and learning experiences of working class students in four contrasting HEI's and is led by Professor Gill Crozier of Sunderland University.

In contrast Dr Alison Fuller of Southampton University is leading a team to study non-participation in HE through focusing on decision making as an embedded social practice and giving consideration to the notion of 'networks of intimacy' as a key theoretical concept in relation to the life stage or course.

Programmes to develop and extend learning processes and outcomes in, across and within disciplines, new subjects and with innovative teaching styles have also been proposed as have reflections upon international comparisons of experience in widening participation, including HE pedagogies, policies and practices or developing programmes within and across higher education locally and nationally.

Dr Chris Hockings of Wolverhampton University will lead a study of aspects of learning and teaching for social diversity and difference. The particular focus here is on innovative teaching methods to engage

diverse students with an inclusive pedagogy across a range of subjects.

Professor Gareth Parry of Sheffield University is leading a team studying the impact of the dual structures of further and higher education on strategies to widen participation in undergraduate education. The main focus here is on the policies and practices of colleges of further education and their role in the expansion and diversification of higher education.

The other two projects focus on key curriculum areas. One led by Dr Geoff Hayward of Oxford University is about the organisation and development of vocational and educational training (VET) and its links into HE across the UK through a sophisticated study of progression routes into and through HE, entitled Degrees of Success. The other led by Professor Julian Williams of Manchester University focuses on pedagogic cultures in relation to learning mathematics and mathematical identities in two contrasting programmes in FE and HE.

Links with current TLRP projects:

Currently there are at least 10 projects funded under the TLRP that are of relevance to this work of WP in HE. There are 5 projects about different aspects of HE, such as

- disabled students,
- Teaching-Learning environments in undergraduate courses,
- the social and organisational mediation of learning in HE,
- learning to perform, and
- the effectiveness of problem-based learning.

There are similar projects within FE and lifelong learning such as on

- transforming learning cultures,
- literacies for learning and
- policy, learning and inclusion in the learning and skills system.

All of these contribute to innovative research in HE, including WP research.

This phase has been launched through TLRP because a key objective is to enhance and extend research capacity, through encouraging collaboration between researchers, practitioners and users concerned with encouraging a greater social diversity of participants in HE. The successful projects are all inter-disciplinary drawing on a range of perspectives and approaches from across the social sciences and well rooted in an understanding of current policy contexts and practices in widening participation and learning

and teaching within and across higher education, involving practitioners.. It is also hoped that the projects will make an important contribution to the achievement of the Programme's broader objectives.

Participation in the TLRP Programme

Programme award holders are expected to collaborate fully with the Programme Director's Team and to participate in and contribute to Programme-level activities throughout the duration of the Programme, irrespective of when their individual project award ends, including those arranged as a part of the Programme's Communication and Impact Strategy and the Programme's strategy for enhancing research capacity, conferences, workshops, seminars, working groups or other activities (e.g. electronic networking, international collaborative activities etc.) to facilitate the exchange of information and collaboration between projects and with other key researchers and policy / practitioner partners.

For more information: contact TLRP's Associate Director Professor Miriam David, m.david@ioe.ac.uk or visit www.tlrp.org