

## Comments welcome

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### **TAKING THE INITIATIVE? TLRP AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

It is almost a decade now since the mid-1990s when the critique of UK educational research was at its height (eg: Hargreaves, Tooley, Hillage). Time moves on, and many of the challenges have been moderated – but the underlying issues have not, and will not, go away. New hurdles and issues also emerge and demand responses.

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme was established in the context of the critique and was, in part, intended as an intervention to achieve ‘improvement’ in what was deemed to be a ‘weak’ field of research. In a sense then, TLRP originated in the belief that something ‘needed to be done to’ the field.

At the time of this lecture, October 2005, TLRP is a little over half way through its presently anticipated duration. The first projects began work in January 2000, and major publications will continue to 2010 and beyond. It is a good time therefore, to take stock, review what has been achieved and think ahead. A recent independent review by NFER (Rudd, Rickinson and Walker 2005) reported that TLRP has been broadly successful in its objectives so far. The Programme has been funding high quality research projects on a wide range of topics covering the lifecourse and with unusually high levels of user engagement. Its thematic work is linking such project work to enduring issues. Its communication and impact infrastructure supports project teams with print and electronic dissemination. Its policy task groups and event programme are being developed to try to apply this knowledge to contemporary problems more quickly. Such progress, and aspiration, reflects the enormous hard work of a very large number of research colleagues and is, above all, a collective achievement. Indeed, I hope and believe that TLRP has now become an initiative which is ‘working with’ the field.

This paper reviews some aspects of this transition and describes TLRP’s major strategies as they are being enacted at present. I then move on to suggest some of the major future challenges facing applied research in the UK and pose the question of how they may be tackled. What is to be done and how might TLRP contribute?

I argue that, whilst TLRP may be seen as a helpful test-bed for some future development, the imagination, energy and resolve needed to rise to future challenges will need responses from the educational research community as a whole. In the context of research selectivity, achieving constructive debate and collective progress together may be the biggest challenge of all – but I hope that we can at least try!

## **TAKING THE INITIATIVE WITH ‘REFLEXIVE ACTIVISM’?**

Geoff Whitty’s inaugural lecture as BERA President this year (Whitty, 2005) summarised the criticisms which have been made of UK educational research – lack of rigour and cumulation, theoretical incoherence, ideological bias, irrelevance, lack of user engagement, poor dissemination, inaccessibility and low value for money. Similar criticisms have been made, and are still being made, in Europe, the US, Australia and elsewhere across the world – and I believe that the issues raised in this paper thus have international resonance.

So what responses are possible?

One of my longest running academic interests has been in coping strategies (eg: Pollard 1982) and some colleagues and I once applied this way of thinking to the imposition of the national curriculum and assessment regime on primary education (see: Pollard et al, 1994; Osborn et al, 2000). Based on empirical work over some years, we constructed a typology of possible responses:

*Compliance*: acceptance of imposed change and adjustment of professional ideology accordingly so that greater control was perceived as acceptable or even desirable.

*Incorporation*: appearing to accept imposed changes but incorporating them into existing modes of working, so that the effects of change were different from that intended.

*Creative mediation*: Taking active control of changes and responding to them in a creative, but possibly selective, way.

*Retreatism*: submission to imposed changes, without change in professional ideology leading to deep-seated feelings of resentment, demoralisation and alienation.

*Resistance*: resistance to imposed changes in the hope that they could not be enforced and that they would gradually 'fade away'.

A similar range of responses can be identified in relation to the way educational researchers have responded to the critique of research in the field. However, simple compliance has been seen as unacceptable, and incorporation can really only be a short term strategy. Similarly, resistance on a broad front is probably as naïve as retreatism is unpalatable. In my judgement then, creative mediation is the only really viable response for educational research as a whole – and this, I think, is where TLRP comes in.

I have always viewed the Programme as a potential vehicle for 'creative mediation'. Thus, when I became Director in 2002, in my first address to the annual TLRP conference I sought to highlight the 'moral purposes' and 'opportunities' which the Programme offered (Pollard, 2002). This argument drew explicitly on an appeal to the Enlightenment commitment to the application of 'science' and 'reason' in the improvement of society. Of course, the opportunity to conduct educational research on behalf of our society also brings with it some serious responsibilities. In particular, I would argue that the role of the intellectual, or of the university, within democratic societies, is to analyse and speak independently – for which 'academic freedom' is essential. This is strong ground on which to stand and offers a platform from which strengths in the field can be promoted and weaknesses addressed.

I built on these arguments in the SERA Lecture of 2003 (Pollard, 2004) under the title: 'What is and what might be?'. I concluded that lecture by suggesting that TLRP's strategies could be seen as an attempt to develop a form of professional 'activism', in the sense suggested by Judyth Sachs (2003) in relation to the teaching profession. According to Sachs, the five foundations for such activity are:

- Social capital
- Engagement
- Collective action
- Transformative politics
- Strategic positioning

Applying this to TLRP, I argued that :

*Social capital* is developed through building networks, generating opportunities to work constructively together, maximising information flows, and evolving a sense of collective purpose and identity through respectful reciprocity. *Engagement* is crucially dependent on being included in what matters – not always easy given the uneven distribution of power and influence in educational affairs. However, the present era of 'evidence-informed' policy-making does generate exceptional

opportunities at present. *Collective action* is rooted in processes of democratic participation and in breaking down the isolation (and isolationism) which tends to be associated with diverse constituencies or inter-institutional competition. *Transformative politics*, for Sachs, is concerned with changing the beliefs, perspectives and opinions which are associated with injustice. It not only challenges dominant interests but also the 'beliefs and practices that sustain power in everyday life'. Finally, *strategic positioning* is concerned with the long term, with being able to identify issues and opportunities in advance, with: 'anticipating and working for a desired future rather than always being on the back foot and reacting to a contested present' (p14).

Whilst strongly supporting the overall thrust of Sachs' argument, I expressed two reservations in my SERA lecture. First, I suggested that she had glossed the need for reflexivity and taking collective responsibility ourselves as a research community. In the case of educational research, whilst some contemporary challenges have been misguided, the need for various forms of development in our field seems to me to be incontestable. Second, in relation to the role of TLRP, I urged caution in the adoption of an overtly political stance – thus reflecting ESRC's core commitments to 'quality, relevance and *independence*'. I reasoned that the strategic positioning which would serve us best was to play a 'straight bat' in entering political debates and thus, for instance, to engage with and provide evidence to all legitimate political parties in each part of the UK. This position, of course, says nothing about our rights and responsibilities regarding action as individual citizens.

My argument therefore is that educational researchers can and should 'take the initiative' in the development of their field. From its origins in external critique and intervention, I would like to think that TLRP can now be characterised as a form of '*reflexive activism*'. We are trying to build the social capital of educational research - developing relationships and networks, sharing perspectives and building alliances with present and future stakeholders both within and beyond the research community. We are trying to promote collective, open and reflexive debate and action in respect of the challenges which need to be faced. We are working on politically engaged impact and dissemination strategies with a view to making a difference. And finally, we are attempting to position ourselves strategically in respect of long term issues.

These are the concerns of the present paper.

The next section describes some features of TLRP's recent development and strategic commitments in more detail. The paper then moves on to discuss some major contemporary and future challenges and to consider how educational researchers might respond to them.

## **TLRP AND ITS STRATEGIC COMMITMENTS**

### **TLRP's aims and dimensions**

The public representation of TLRP's aims emphasises the *positive* contribution being made to research on teaching and learning – a low-key, but very deliberate, attempt to challenge the previously dominant model of deficiency.

*Learning:* TLRP aims 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. These include both the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

*Lifecourse:* TLRP supports research projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning. The Programme is concerned with patterns of success and difference, inclusion and exclusion through the lifecourse.

*Enrichment:* TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. The Programme promotes research on teaching and learning across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports various forms of national and international co-operation and comparison.

*Expertise:* TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research-informed policy and practice. This work is the particular focus of the Programme's research capacity building team.

*Improvement:* TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and contributes to the improvement of policy and practice in the UK. The Programme works to maximise the impact of its research.

TLRP's substantive work focuses on the outcomes of teacher/learner interaction in many settings, and is thus central to educational research. However, it does not by any means embrace the whole field. In particular, it does not draw significantly on the interface between education and cognitive psychology, neurobiology and other learning sciences. Nor does it *fully* address the broader concerns of sociology, economics, history, philosophy, political science, etc as they contribute to education.

The Programme's research projects started work during 2000 and the last funded research activity is presently expected to end in mid-2008. Major publications are expected throughout 2009/10.

Up to 2005, there have been eight major TLRP funding competitions:

- Phase I (2000-03) supported four networks of projects (three in school sectors and one in post-compulsory education);
- Phase II (2001-04) supports nine projects (six in school sectors and three in post-compulsory sectors);
- Phase III (2003-08) supports twelve additional projects in post-compulsory sectors.
- Building on Phase II funding, 'extension projects' have been funded in Scotland (four from 2003-05), Northern Ireland (three from 2004-07) and Wales (four from 2004-07).
- Further projects are being funded in England in a Widening Participation in Higher Education competition (2006-08).
- Five Thematic Groups ran from 2002-4.
- Six Thematic Seminar Series will run from 2005-06.
- Two Career Development Associates (2000-03) and five Research Training Fellowships (2001-08) have also been funded.

The total number of awards made to the end of 2005 is expected to be over 60. The number of researchers actively engaged in the Programme up to the end of 2005 is estimated at 450. At present, TLRP is staffed by a geographically distributed Directors' Team of five (3.3 fte) and by a Programme Office of three (2.4 fte).

The total programme budget is now a little over £30m, and TLRP is the largest of ESRC's investments. The budget grew during 2004/5 through the start of extension projects in

Wales and Northern Ireland, the award of a JISC ICT bid on the development of virtual research environments (VRE) and a new competition for research on widening participation in higher education. Further initiatives are under consideration. It is worth noting that TLRP is an unusual element within ESRC's portfolio because of the proportion of co-funding – with some 97% from government bodies and agencies.

### **TLRP's strategic commitments**

TLRP's development is driven by six major strategic commitments:

- User engagement for relevance and quality
- Knowledge generation by project teams
- Knowledge synthesis through thematic activities
- Knowledge transformation for impact
- Capacity building for professional development
- Partnerships for sustainability

Because of the duration, scale and complexity of TLRP, these elements are managed simultaneously - for instance, with some projects being commissioned just as others complete. However, as the Programme matures, there is also a progressive change in the balance of activity, with more emphasis being placed on knowledge synthesis, transformation and impact. Explicit strategies to underpin post-Programme *sustainability* have also been introduced in relation to capacity building, the use of ICT to support research development in the field and the deepening of partnerships with key cognate bodies.

#### *User engagement for relevance and quality:*

This commitment has been sustained throughout TLRP's duration, with early foundations created by the wide-ranging consultations across all sectors conducted by the first Directors' Team, Charles Desforges and John Kanefsky. This has continued and the strength of user engagement, from the inception of project design, has been a prominent assessment criterion in all TLRP funding competitions. For TLRPs form of applied educational research, this is believed to enhance relevance and quality. Project teams are expected to both work closely with practitioners and others in their research sites and also to link up with key national organisations with potentially 'high leverage' for dissemination and impact activity. In most cases, such relationships are reflected in the membership of project 'Advisory Groups'.

The Directors' Team support project activity by developing links with high-leverage user organisations in each educational sector and in each part of the UK. TLRP also works directly with governments in each part of the UK to maximise the use of its research. TLRP is represented by the Director on significant national bodies for the coordination of education research - in Wales (Education and Training Research Liaison Committee of the National Assembly for Wales); England (National Education Research Forum and the DfES Schools Research Advisory Group); Scotland (Management Committee of the Applied Educational Research Scheme). The Programme also has excellent links with senior government officials in Northern Ireland. In fostering such developments, TLRP ran a sequence of 'showcase' events with sessions in Westminster, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

#### *Knowledge generation by project teams:*

This is at the core of TLRP's activities and, clearly, the Programme has no substance without the contribution of many teams of researchers spread across UK institutions. For some, as the field itself broadens, their TLRP work addresses fields which are relatively new to them. However, a substantial number of research teams are built around long

established programmes of work by key applicants who 'hitch a ride' on TLRP funding for a while. Such work often offers significant added value.

The Programme's projects are at very different stages – from some which have now ended to others which are just being commissioned. In all cases, each project team is linked to the Programme as a whole by 'critical friends' from the Directors' Team and the Steering Committee with relevant sectoral experience. The policy is to offer support and a relatively 'light touch' in terms of the research process – recognising that there are many different ways of achieving high quality. However, each project is required to submit a detailed report in relation to their progress during each calendar year of funding, and this is structured in relation to many of the Programme's key objectives and challenges. This enables the Steering Committee and Directors' Team to take stock of on-going progress.

Projects are encouraged to share information about their work with each other, and inter-project activities are supported both practically and financially. A compendium of annual reports is also published within the Programme. A further major opportunity for sharing each year is the annual TLRP conference, which is normally held in November.

Despite the number of projects which have been funded, analysis of the topics covered in relation to the Programme's goals revealed many 'gaps' in coverage. An 'associate project' scheme was therefore initiated, thus enhancing TLRP's portfolio without bearing the responsibility of core funding. Six projects endorsed under this scheme address: early years and primary provision; identity and learning through schooling, skills strategies of multi-national corporations, school teacher professionalism, the development of virtual research environments and the learning of older people.

*Knowledge synthesis through thematic activities:*

The Programme's strategy for thematic development is a growing focus of work and aims to 'add value' to the work of projects. The portfolio of initiatives includes: consultancies, thematic groups, thematic seminar series, conferences, workshops, thematic meta-tagging of outputs and sectoral reviews. A conceptual framework through which the products of such initiatives is organised and integrated was discussed, endorsed and operationalised through the Directors' Forum, the Steering Committee, the Annual Conference, a meta-tagging system in an electronic output repository and within the Programme's database. Five Thematic Groups concluded their work during 2004, and arrangements were made for publication of outputs in special issues of journals. Six Thematic Seminar Series were commissioned to start work in January 2005. TLRP's Annual Conferences, held in November each year, make important contributions to this work. A review of outstanding thematic issues will lead to further initiatives by members of the Directors' Team where appropriate or to proposed consultancies if additional expertise is required. Cross-Programme analysis of specific thematic issues is scheduled for completion in 2007/8, with 2008/9 being devoted to meta-analysis of generic concerns.

*Knowledge transformation for impact:*

A dozen 'Research Briefings' have been produced so far offering concise summaries of project findings and providing for targeted distribution. The first 'TLRP Commentary' was published in 2004 following the formation of a 'Policy Task Group', to respond quickly to the contemporary issue of 'Personalised Learning'. A project has been funded to explore the use of video in disseminating research results. TLRP has established a publicly accessible knowledge management system that includes a D-Space electronic repository and meta-tagging system. This is now used for deposition of all project publications as part of the annual reporting procedure, and has significantly improved the availability of outputs via the internet and major databases. The first books in TLRP's '*Improving Learning*' and '*Improving Practice*' series, published by Routledge, are due out in early 2006. The use of 'special issues' of journals, with particularly strong support from *Education Review*, is

becoming a major means for TLRP projects and thematic groups to communicate findings (see, e.g. *Research Papers in Education* and *The Curriculum Journal*)

TLRP also seeks to transform and disseminate research knowledge in partnership with others. Key users, such as the General Teaching Council (England), the National College for School Leadership, the Learning and Skills Development Agency, the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education and Department for Education and Skills, have been extremely helpful in the dissemination of results through their communication systems. For example, agreement has been reached with GTC(E) to feature TLRP some projects on their popular 'Research of the Month' website, NCSL distributed a booklet on learning to all schools in England which drew extensively on TLRP, LSDA issued a TLRP 'Review of Research in Practice' in their Building Effective Research Series and the DfES circulated widely the TLRP Commentary on 'Personalised Learning'. Excellent working relationships have also developed with the Higher Education Academy and will continue with the development of the HEFCE-funded work on widening participation in higher education.

#### *Capacity building:*

Capacity building is an intrinsic part of TLRP's work. Indeed, in all phases of TLRP funding, it has been a criterion for project selection, and this work is supported, monitored and reported on each year. Particular attention has been paid to skill and career development of contract research staff, with special events each year. Additionally, with support from the Department for Education and Skills, TLRP has funded five Research Training Fellowships, which enable senior practitioners to study part-time for PhD's in association with TLRP projects.

From 2002-2005 the Programme's Research Capacity Building Network, based at Cardiff, provided cross-Programme training services in the research methods which were felt to be particularly appropriate in the study of teaching and learning. Each included: research design issues, the use of large-scale data-sets, and the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. RCBN also initiated a journal, *Research Capacity Building*, and a website offering advice and resources (now incorporated and maintained within the main TLRP site).

A new strategy for capacity building provision has been adopted for 2005-8. This is based on an explicit attempt to embed processes for the development of research expertise within the social practices of educational researchers and is intended to complement ESRC's provision through the National Centre for Research Methods and Research Methods Programme. Additionally, there are close working relationships with the Applied Research in Education Scheme in Scotland and with relevant UK learned societies, such as the British Educational Research Association. A particular feature of TLRP's new provision is the promotion of a range of modules on research training which will be freely available to institutions and groups across the UK. These are intended to support institutions in providing training to satisfy ESRC requirements for both higher degree students and staff who are new to research activity.

In short, the objective of TLRP's capacity building work is to work *with* the academic community and to support the development of new forms of commitment and provision for the professional self-improvement of educational researchers.

#### *Partnerships for sustainability:*

Despite its size, TLRP is still small in relation to the challenge and range educational research. It is also only expected to exist for a limited period. For such reasons, we have sought to develop close working relationships with other organisations. A least five different forms of partnership can be identified.



First, we seek expertise from which we can benefit. Such partnerships exist with the British Education Index (BEI) for electronic knowledge management, the Cambridge Centre for Applied Research in Education Technology (CARET) for development of an advanced ICT infrastructure, and Routledge for book and journal publications.

Second, as indicated above, we work with key user organisations which are generous enough to promote TLRP work through their communications systems, and thus lend us some of their leverage as we attempt to maximise impact.

Third, we work with partners where cooperation enables us to be more effective – for example, a recent TES special supplement was co-funded with NIACE and LSDA. Indeed, TLRP aspires to contribute to a series of sectoral reviews, developed in partnership with others. An excellent start has been made by TLRP contributors to the Nuffield Foundation's 14-19 Review, and it is hoped, in due course, to work with the Institute for Employment Research on a review of work-based learning.

Fourth, as indicated previously, we work where we can with the government bodies which help to form policy regarding education research within each country of the UK. For some years too, TLRP has contributed to the work of the NERF, through the membership of first Charles Desforges and, more recently, myself. This has been valuable both in the expression of support and reservation for particular initiatives, as appropriate. For example, TLRP has contributed actively to discussions and development work on the establishment of a National Education Evidence Portal (NEEP).

Finally, we work with organisations which may, in due course, take on some of the resources, assets or commitments of TLRP into the future. Indeed, one of our informal goals is to 'give everything away' by the end. The most important legacy organisations are seen as being among the professional research associations – and, in particular, BERA. TLRP participants are active in membership and a number of key positions are held by colleagues who bridge both organisations. I myself was delighted in 2004 to be elected to serve on BERA's Executive Council. There are many areas on which cooperation is developing, including joint capacity building activities and the possibility of eventual transfer of much of TLRP's IT infrastructure. On the capacity building front, we are also very pleased to be working with UCET's research committee. Other associations with which we have collaborated closely include SRHE, with major contributions being made to their 2005 conference.

### *Conclusion*

Taking stock of TLRP as a whole, I believe it would be fair to say that clear aims and strategies have been developed. They sometimes seem bold (or even foolish!) and, of course, we struggle to fully enact them. However, the present Directors' Team have, with the support of ESRC and the TLRP Steering Committee, tried to build an infrastructure and establish social practices and relationships which are capable of both representing the quality of educational research to others and sustaining challenges within our own research community. In respect of both audiences, we have tried to do this in constructive ways and to build mutual respect and understanding. In summary, we have tried to engage in 'reflexive activism'.

NFER's Mid-term Review of TLRP, commissioned by ESRC prior to release of the 2006 funding award, assessed the quality of research, user engagement, research synergies and added value, capacity building and impact on policy and practice. The report was pleasingly positive (see <http://www.tlrp.org/manage/progrep.html>). For example:

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.

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. (Rudd, Rickinson and Walker, 2005)

The recent growth in the funds which have been entrusted to the Programme, coming from HEFCE and each UK government, is also very encouraging – as were the generous comments made by Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of ESRC at his 2005 address to the BERA Conference.

Overall then, things may seem to be moving forward reasonably well – but how does this sort of activity match up to challenges facing educational research? What are the challenges for reflexive activism in the future?

In the remainder of the paper I offer some thoughts on what I have called 'contextual', 'conceptual', 'methodological' and 'transformational' challenges. These are starters – which I hope others may dispute, reinterpret or augment as the academic process continues.

## **CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES - IMPROVING OPPORTUNITIES?**

### **Can we further promote contemporary commitments to 'evidence informed' policy and practice?**

The rhetoric of government *policy-making* asserts that policy will, whenever possible, be based on careful consideration of available research evidence. Of course, we have to be extremely realistic about this, and there are many examples of limits in its implementation and of the power of more political considerations. However, it remains a very significant commitment and, in principle, establishes a clear and positive role for researchers in contributing to democratic decision making. This has not always been so. Further, the recent frustrations of New Labour in achieving change in public services has created greater willingness to listen to new ideas and analyses than we have seen for some time.

This is thus a real opportunity now for educational researchers who are willing to engage with governments across the UK and government funded research is running at exceptional levels in many research institutions. At the same time, we need to support UK governments in this 'evidence informed' aspiration and hold them to account as necessary.

It is worth noting too that this commitment is the route to large-scale funding of longer, multidisciplinary projects with more sophisticated research designs than have normally been possible in the past.

In relation to evidence informed *practice*, the situation may be more complex. There is considerable support for practitioner research as a form of professional development and there have been many specific initiatives to support its development. The GTCs and many teacher associations have been strongly in favour but the cost and challenge of system-wide implementation has so far seemed too great for at least the English government. Apart from the cost, one wonders if the enhancement of teachers' capacity for independent decision-making is seen as a priority. The position taken, and investments made, by the new TDA

will be crucial in this – and given the weakening of local government’s educational infrastructures, there could be a significant role for HEIs in the future.

### **Can we promote a more realistic public understanding of the nature of social science and of the nature of the knowledge which is typically produced?**

One of the challenges which educational researchers have faced in recent years has been that of demonstrating ‘what works’, an argument which often draws rhetoric from comparisons with medical research. In my opinion, expectations of categoric certainty as a product of social science are naïve – and suggest a lack of ontological and epistemological awareness. It is a hard challenge, but my view is that we need to try to promote a more realistic public perception of the status of knowledge of the sort produced by educational research, and social science generally.

At the same time, we need to establish alternative and constructive (but realistic) stances. For instance, in relation to education, I often argue the following:

As in other fields of applied social science, cause-and-effect (or ‘what works’) is often hard to establish precisely, but educational research nevertheless has the potential to provide information, analysis and insight, and thus to significantly improve understanding and decision making by users.

Educational *problems*, of practice or policy, are often complex and immediate – but are invariably grounded in more enduring *issues* which merit both practitioner enquiry and sustained, cumulative, multi-disciplinary, social scientific research. The introduction of evidence can clarify the key factors and major *dilemmas* which practitioners and/or policy-makers face in decision-making.

TLRP is taking this stance in its dealings with policy makers and in supporting the professional judgement and expertise of practitioners. For example, this is evident in the analyses of issues and dilemmas within the *TLRP Commentaries* on Personalised Learning, 14-19 Education and Teaching and Learning in Schools.

Such arguments do not mean however, that education and educational researchers (and other social scientists) can by-pass a responsibility to work to achieve the highest degrees of confidence in their findings and analyses as possible. There is little doubt that much more could be done in this regard and the status of the field is undermined when the issue is glossed. In TLRP, we have had sustained debates on the nature of the ‘warrants’ which may be available for project findings. As a consequence, each project’s Research Briefing includes a statement outlining the methodological foundations of the study.

As part of a campaign to establish a more realistic public understanding of social scientific knowledge, it may also be possible to promote appreciation of different types of research in the field.

### **Can we find ways of overcoming tensions about the nature of research in education and the strains which structural differentiation in HE has produced?**

There is a continuing lack of clarity over the meaning of the term ‘research’ within the field. Views are patterned by underlying value commitments, practices, professional communities, careers and institutional interests. However, it is perhaps possible to identify three main forms of work: ‘education research’, ‘educational research’ and ‘professional enquiry’.

Building on Whitty's inaugural lecture as BERA President, 'education research' rests on the major contributory disciplines of education and on the significance of the production of new forms of knowledge for their own sake. 'Educational research' is more applied, seeking to use disciplinary insights, theories and methodological tools in illuminating issues of policy or practice – and most of TLRP's projects would fall into this category. As Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of ESRC, confirmed in his 2005 address to the BERA conference, there is a significant and growing amount of high quality education and educational research work in the UK, both quantitative and qualitative. This draws on social scientific designs and methods and is gradually building a more sophisticated understanding of enduring educational issues. However, such work is undertaken by only a minority of educationalists in HE, with a concentration in research-intensive universities.

There is also a large amount of practitioner research or 'professional enquiry' - much of which is of great value in the improvement of practice and, in the hands of some, can also illuminate more enduring issues. Indeed the UK has an international reputation for the quality of such work. Quite properly, such activity is often associated with and promoted by institutions with strong traditions of teacher education and professional development.

Patterns in the distribution of these forms of research cannot be divorced from consideration of the structure of initial teacher education and the consequences of successive rounds of research selectivity through the RAE. In this context, any statement on the issue must acknowledge the remarkable capacity of dedicated educationalists in disadvantaged circumstances to engage in research. Some of this is of excellent quality, with specialist centres in some 'modern' universities and colleges making particularly strong contributions. However, in peer review assessments, the quality of much of such work is often felt to be relatively weak in social science terms.

Whilst some of the best educational research bridges these traditions and circumstances, tensions between them may also be seen as limiting progress within the field. New ways of recognising, distinguishing and affirming the value of complementary forms of research and enquiry are needed – and again organisations such as BERA and the TDA have significant roles to play. TLRP will try to facilitate around the edges, but this is a major, highly complex, issue.

### **Can we counter demographic imbalances among educational researchers and embrace research capacity building as professional self-development?**

A high proportion of the UK's active educational researchers, including many of those with a social science background, are expected to retire within the next ten years. There are also significant regional and national differences in UK educational research capacity, with Wales and Northern Ireland facing particular challenges. The number of home-based higher degree students is insufficient for replacement.

There is a pressing need to ensure that future generations of educational researchers have the time and capacity to develop the theoretical advances needed to meet new research challenges and are skilled in a variety of different methodologies and approaches including conducting practice-based research, secondary data analysis, quantitative and statistical analysis, integration of qualitative and quantitative data; international comparative research, research synthesis, etc. At present of course, there are particular shortages in high level quantitative expertise.

However, for HE institutions specialising in education, the differentiating effect of post-RAE funding allocations has been very significant indeed. This is one of the main reasons behind TLRP's interest in transferable 'modules' to support capacity building in institutions which

suffer from insufficient core funding for research development. The resources of ESRC's National Centre for Research Methods of course remain available to all.

Welcome though such initiatives may be, the TLRP experience suggests that the research community continues at present to find it hard to embrace the explicit development of expertise as an integral part of personal and institutional development. In large part perhaps, this may relate to the conditions of work for both academic and contract staff, but that can also be seen as an excuse. Do we really take seriously our own professional development?

TLRP's 'alert' services, website, journal and training module initiative are all ways of trying to support such engagement, but the energy, agency and prioritisation to make use of such facilities must come from colleagues and institutions themselves.

### **Can we sustain constructive and respectful ways of conducting necessary intellectual struggles across 'tribes and territories'?**

The present community of educational researchers continues to be characterised by considerable methodological and epistemological diversity, and there are strengths in this. Indeed, if bio-diversity offers resources for future problems which we may not yet have imagined, then could not something similar be said for theoretical diversity?

A downside, however, seems to be that the climate in which educational issues are debated can sometimes become highly charged as colleagues with different allegiances, networks, theoretical positions, methodological commitments, etc, critique each other. In part, perhaps this is inevitable given education's influence on future generations, for the field is also often caught up in debates on 'what is, and what ought to be'. For these reasons, judgement and values are necessarily involved at points of research conceptualisation and application, whether by researchers, practitioners or policy-makers.

It is important to remember too, that academic debate, difference and argument, make essential contributions to the progress of the field. Further, many of the issues which have been hard fought in recent years have been of great significance in evolving responses to external critique. My personal unease comes when this leads to internal battles which sometimes appear to fail to respect the integrity of the individuals concerned. This is not just a matter of 'being nice' to each other, important though respect for different positions may be. It is also about creating the conditions in which constructive debate can take place so that important issues may be resolved or moved forward.

Overall, though I would argue that in the past few years there has been greater respect for, and appreciation of, different positions and acceptance of 'fitness for purpose'. The production of Furlong and Oancea's analysis of quality criteria for assessing applied and practice-based research is one example of this, and recent seminar workshops convened by TLRP on 'Reviewing Reviews' is facilitating constructive dialogue among those involved in both systematic and other forms of review.

BERA creates opportunities to support such processes through the annual conference, special interest groups, Research Intelligence and the British Educational Research Journal - and recent Presidents, such as Anne Edwards and John Furlong, have worked assiduously on such issues. An improving climate for debate is creating, in my view, new possibilities for collective progress.

TLRP is active on this too, working across many disciplines, theories, methodologies, sectors and institutions. The distributed nature of the Directors' Team has proved to be an

asset, with contacts into a wide range of academic networks. One other practical facility which may prove to be of future importance concerns the development of virtual research environments (VREs). TLRP, in partnership with CARET and funding from JISC, has already done a good deal of work on this and it is hoped, in due course, to make the technology available to BERA SIGs. With modern technologies, we should perhaps expect quite rapidly changing media for future academic debate – but the need to combine robust argument with interpersonal respect will remain.

## **CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES – IMPROVING UNDERSTANDING?**

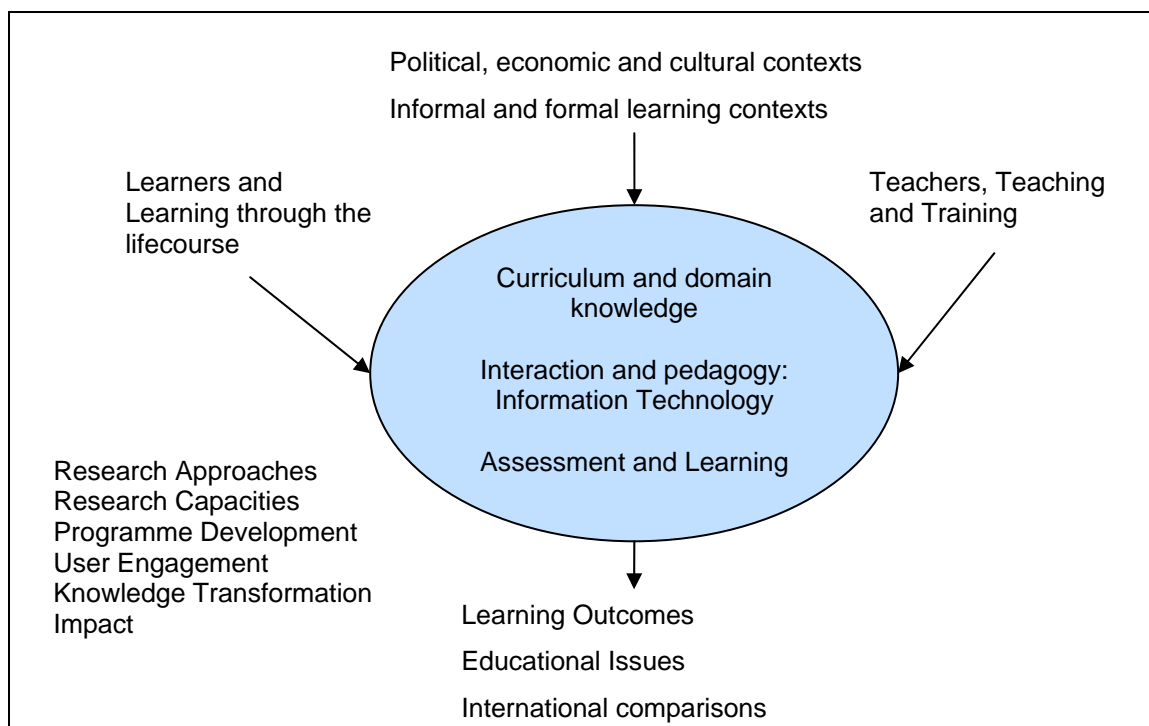
### **How can we contribute to debates on future research priorities and locate these within existing knowledge and understanding?**

A robust, sustainable and inclusive foresight system does not, at present, exist for UK educational research. This is a major problem in enabling researchers in the field to take the initiative in influencing ‘issues for investigation’ rather than simply accepting those which might reflect political priorities at a particular point in time. In an era in which very large projects are being encouraged, the establishment of priorities is particularly important even for responsive mode applications.

Of course, NERF has taken a number of initiatives to try to fill this void but has not, in my view, won the legitimacy or assembled the expertise or range of stakeholders which would be needed to tackle it successfully. This could be an area in which a UK-wide organisation such as BERA could take a lead. ESRC, with its concern with the ‘health of disciplines’, also occasionally collates views of relevance to this.

In such exercises, it seems to me to be important to try to improve on the simple and all-to-common ‘listing’ of popular topics of concern, with almost no rationale or theorisation underpinning them. Such a strategy makes it difficult to see patterns, relationships to previous knowledge and potential for cumulation. There is a role here for theory!

TLRP faces similar problems and, indeed, the Directors’ Team is increasingly focused on activities to ‘take stock’ of the overall findings of the Programme and what they tell us about enduring educational issues. As part of this, a major rationalisation of the Programme’s thematic development strategy took place during 2004 and this is the major tool for adding value. It is based on a simple conceptual framework (see below).



This framework is being used to organise existing thematic work and to commission new initiatives. It is also the basis of the Programme's data-base of user and research interests and of the meta-tagging system which underpins TLRP's D-Space repository of outputs.

This illustrates one approach. How though, could we progressively take stock of what we think we know across the field as a whole? And how might such understanding then inform decision-making about priorities for future research?

At the present time, the field is fragmented and segmented in so many ways that practitioners, policy makers and ESRC researchers often remain uncertain about key aspects of educational knowledge. How then, can we debate, refine and communicate what we think we know in ways which are appropriate to the state of our knowledge?

The ideas outlined below build on education submissions made to ESRC in a recent consultation on key issues for future social scientific research. They are organised in five clusters: 'context', 'participants', 'knowledge', 'processes' and 'outcomes'.

**Context: new educational structures, processes and governance for a learning society**

The significance of informal learning, diversity and the pace of contemporary change are increasingly understood, but our educational institutions and systems of provision are believed to remain rooted in the past. Research and innovation on the purposes, processes and structures of education in relation to the capabilities needed for the new knowledge economy is seen as a pressing need. This is likely to involve questions about both structures and governance as well as the classic educational concerns of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Educationists have always worked in the space between 'what is and what might be', and there is a research contribution to be made too.

**Participants: identity, learner engagement and agency**

A cluster of priorities concerned the individual and his/her engagement with learning and as a citizen. Such work might include research on attitudes and behaviour to

learning, learning identities, discipline and the ways in which 'personalised' education is experienced. Further development is advocated on the identification and measurement of learning outcomes, including understanding, engagement, disposition, qualifications, skills for life, etc.. A particularly important element of this concerns research on learning mastery and 'agency' more generally. Learning how to learn and its relationship to social participation and citizenship is seen as a topic of immense importance in a rapidly changing and socially differentiated society.

### **Knowledge: understanding and skill in subject and vocational domains**

Research on the development of knowledge, skills and understanding in a range of subject domains is perceived to be a high priority for research. Particular foci include: mathematics learning and quantitative skills; improving science education; and literacy and basic skills – as well as language learning, creativity and the arts. Vocational teaching and learning is expected to take new forms in the knowledge-based economies, but is seen as constrained at present and requiring research effort. E-learning is perceived as being significant in this context but the pedagogical implications of information and communication technologies is regarded as having a weak research base.

### **Processes: interaction in teaching and learning**

Transforming understanding of teaching and learning in a range of educational sectors is seen as the major substantive goal of TLRP. As such, the general area is not seen as a priority for major additional funding in the short term. However, there is a progressive need to consolidate insights from current research, both in the UK and internationally, and to identify practical policies and new forms of effective practice.

### **Consequences: education, learning and the lifecourse**

Research is felt to be needed to improve our understanding of how educational choices and underachievement in early life lead to profound and persistent effects on life chances in later life and how interventions might be designed at different stages of the lifecourse to tackle such inequalities. This might require bringing together education and social policy research, as well as other research in sociology, education, and psychology. It also requires more integrated thinking in terms of services and delivery. For example, priority research questions in relation to early education could include: what is the effect of formal and informal education on children's long term well-being and the development of capabilities in their families and communities? how can initial education sustain a commitment to lifelong learning for economic and social advantage? what changes would be needed for education to be the main policy instrument for intervention to overcome social exclusion? In relation to such topics, more work is needed on ethnicity in relation to educational provision, identity and learning outcomes. An overarching challenge in work of this sort would be how to address the methodological challenges of connecting individual experiences and learning with changes in social structures.

The topics and framework above are clearly tentative and need much more refinement. However, the principle of trying to nest practical problems within a more analytic research framework is one which, in my view, could offer a way forward in building more enduring forms of educational knowledge. In any prioritising initiative, it is important to try to hold onto the 'big picture' and to stay in touch the enduring issues which underlie particular problems.



## **METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES: IMPROVING APPLIED RESEARCH?**

### **Can we offer appropriate warrants for our findings?**

There are some pretty standard issues about research quality which colleagues tackle routinely at the point of grant application. Such scientific questions lie at the core of TLRP's funding assessment criteria. Thus we have:

*Contribution to Knowledge.* Is the proposal grounded in a thorough review of the extant literature in relevant fields? Does the proposal have a coherent theoretical and analytical framework? Is it likely to make a significant contribution to the development of the current research knowledge base?

*Research Design and Methods.* Does the proposal clearly and fully describe a research design appropriate for the achievement of the stated research objectives? Is the project time-scale appropriate to the research design? Are there rigorous methods for assessing learning outcomes (broadly conceived)? Are there realistic proposals for data-collection and data-analysis? Has careful consideration been given to any ethical issues that may be raised?

In TLRP, we have tried to sustain a reflexive awareness of these issues *throughout* the research process. This happens through processes such as the annual conference presentations, the project reporting procedure and through the request, at the end of the research, to explicitly take stock in terms of what it is reasonable to conclude from its findings. What, we ask, is the 'warrant' of the research? What can the research team say which will enable the public, practitioners, policy makers or other researchers to evaluate how much confidence they should place in the findings? Such warrant statements feature on every TLRP *Research Briefing* and the issue will be addressed within the *Improving Learning* book series.

I would argue that this review of the warrant of a set of findings is about rigour and transparency, represents a public obligation *and* is in the interests of educational research as a field.

This argument accepts, of course, that there are many forms of warrant and that each approach should be appropriate to the type of research being reported. Where an approach is associated with critiques of some particular forms of research or with heavy-handed calls for inappropriately structured information, then it will quite properly be challenged.

It is important to hang on to the bigger issues. These are, first, that the public has a legitimate right to be provided with a clear account of the methodological basis of our research so that the status of findings and analyses can be evaluated. Second, that it is in the interests of educational researchers to demonstrate research quality and to promote their expertise more transparently.

My personal hope then is that educational researchers will fully engage with this issue, make it their own and shape expectations and emerging conventions.

### **Can we enhance quality through appropriate user engagement?**

'User engagement' is one of the mantras of the last decade, and has been articulated by many funders (including ESRC) in relation to all applied social science. It has been taken particularly seriously within education, for example, by TLRP. Notwithstanding some

terminological in-exactitude, a simple representation of the argument identifies ‘partners’, ‘advisers’ and ‘users’ in relation to participation at different stages in the research process.

	<b>Partners</b> work alongside researchers throughout the research	<b>Advisers</b> support progress at key points	<b>Users</b> help to transform findings as they become available	
Experience a problem	↓			
Analyse the issue				
Formulate research questions				
Design the project			↓	
Seek funding				
Gather data				
Analyse			↓	
Write up				
Disseminate				↓

TLRP experience suggests that the relevance, significance, quality and impact of each project's research can be enhanced, and that research users often become wonderfully effective 'champions' for project teams and their work. Whilst user and adviser roles help, the more significant contribution is that of a research partner, engaged throughout the research process. In such circumstances, learning can be in both directions and the technical validity and practical implementation of the research can benefit.

Indeed, the NFER mid-term review of TLRP highlighted ‘evidence of considerable progress’ in relation to 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.

This argument needs to be approached carefully however, because user engagement of these sorts may not be appropriate across all forms of education and educational research. In particular, there is a long-established tension between the role of analysts in ‘taking’ research questions or independently ‘making’ their own. Lurking too is Becker's challenge: ‘whose side are we on?’ which highlights the question of *which* users a research team chooses to engage with.

NERF has recently begun to promote the idea of ‘development and research’ (‘D & R’) projects, as opposed to ‘R&D’ work. This takes the argument further and is an interesting development, but it is again crucial that fitness for purpose considerations apply.

### **Can we build understanding on the accumulated work of others?**

In principle, few would dispute the importance of framing new research in terms of what is already known. Thus we have the ‘review of literature’. This has traditionally taken many forms depending on factors such as the nature of the research question or focus, the audience/s for which it is created and the range of literature which is under review. There is great scope for the demonstration of both expertise – and for partiality.

Three initial issues need to be faced. First, there is the globalisation and exponential growth of 'knowledge', with new repositories of electronic information appearing across the world linked by increasingly sophisticated knowledge management systems. Second, there is the related question of how to evaluate such information? What procedures should be adopted to assess relevance and quality? Third, there is the issue of how to draw on academic understanding, expertise and judgement – relating units of information one to another with awareness of theory and consequence.

Thus we have issues capable of stimulating innovation in, for instance, 'systematic reviews', but also of fuelling active debate about the limitations of such approaches. Once again, it seems to me that we are caught up in a historic period in which the growth and accessibility of new information is forcing reappraisal of traditional ways of taking stock of accumulated knowledge. Some of the debates are robust.

Working with Harry Torrance and Judy Sebba, TLRP has been contributing to an attempt to find ways forward by running a small series of seminar/workshops on 'reviewing reviews'. This focuses particularly on fitness for purpose and, accepting the case for procedural transparency, in exploring more clearly what this might mean for different legitimate forms of review.

Once again, this is an example of an issue which, in my view, is being faced and progressed – thanks to the willingness of colleagues to try to find ways forward. Another focus for 'reflexive activism'?

### **Can we engage with the expertise within other disciplines and fields?**

Multidisciplinary research in or about education remains limited, and those in some associated disciplines at present appear to accord a relatively low status work in the field. More researchers from contributing disciplines need to be attracted to study educational issues. Indeed, strengthening inter-disciplinary research on educational issues could offer a lot to basic knowledge and understanding, and could also build capacities in a range of disciplines to tackle educational problems.

A particular case is that of psychology, which once made prominent contributions to education. Reviewing the development of the field, my view is that recent educational research has been most strongly influenced by sociology and by socio-cultural psychology. Indeed, an increasingly comprehensive and convincing understanding of the influence of social and cultural influences on learning and teaching is developing. However, the influence within education of much of contemporary psychology has become minimal. In part, this is probably because of trends within psychology itself, and in part because the attention of educationalists has been drawn to work on aspects of the systemic government reforms which have taken place in recent years. In the public sphere more broadly, there is a significant and growing interest in cognitive and developmental psychology, brain science and its implications for learning – and educationalists do have to find appropriate ways of responding to this.

In my view therefore, there is a growing intellectual case and practical requirement for the social scientific study of education, with its sociological and socio-cultural insights, to engage further with the various forms of contemporary scientific study of cognition, mind, brain and human development. The issue could also, of course, be expressed the other way round.

### **Can we learn from understanding generated in different educational sectors?**

Educational provision tends to be structured in terms of sectors, each of which has its own characteristics and changing research priorities. For example, in relation to young children a major issue concerns the move to integrated children's services and multi-professionalism. In higher education, a particularly pressing contemporary concern is with widening participation.

However, there are also many issues which crop up in all, or many, sectors. TLRP's 'big themes' - context, learner, teacher, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, outcomes, consequences, etc – are designed to facilitate study of these continuities and differences.

Working cross-sectorally is not an easy challenge to meet, and researchers, policy-makers and practitioners each tend to be more comfortable within the boundaries of their sector and its social practices, discourse, priorities and taken-for-granted assumptions. Research expertise is needed which is capable of authentic study *within* particular sectors whilst also drawing on theory, knowledge and methodologies held in common *across* sectors. 'Balkanisation' of work in each sector is evident, even within a cross-sectoral programme such as TLRP, and is limiting.

### **Can we find appropriate ways to research significant educational outcomes?**

This too is not easy, for many of the things which are thought to be important in education are often relatively intangible. However, most educational research in recent decades has focused on processes alone and this has undoubtedly weakened the impact of research in the field.

For this reason, discussion on the identification and measurement of worthwhile educational outcomes (or appropriate indicators of outcomes) has been sustained since the start of TLRP. The technical problems are considerable and have been rehearsed in special issue of *The Curriculum Journal* edited by Mary James (2005). The complexities are increasingly recognised by others, and DfES recently invited a TLRP team to facilitate a seminar on this topic.

I suspect that the need for this sort of work may not be widely accepted within the research community. Studying processes is extremely interesting, as I know myself, but if one also wants to make a difference, then being able to investigate changes and consequences can also make powerful contributions to progress. We need both elements.

This is one of the reasons behind ESRC's new provision for funding very large projects. It raises the possibility of credible bids of up to £5m by multi-disciplinary teams with sophisticated, multi-method research designs. For education, a clear grip on outcomes (however broadly defined) is likely to be an essential feature of such bids.

### **Can we develop more analytic international and comparative research?**

The scope for globalised knowledge in education is as great as in any other field.

However, educational research in most countries across the world has tended to be 'national' in its orientation and is often focused on specific 'problems' – which is one of the reasons why RAE panels find the assessment of international standards so difficult. More significantly, the tendency may constrain the accumulation of more analytic forms of knowledge, with relatively little comparison of national cases in relation to key educational

*issues*. In this respect, the potential for 'home-international' comparative work is now considerable within the UK and seems likely to be productive for appropriate topics.

More broadly, educational policies and practices appear to be becoming increasingly inter-related across the world, with the influence of OECD being particularly important. The opportunity for international comparative study of key issues is thus growing rapidly.

Arguably at present, the more disciplinary forms of 'education' research may be better equipped both theoretically and in terms of their international academic networks, to engage in such work. The challenge of bringing together theoretical and substantive analysis in an international context is considerable, but it is a prize to be grasped. We in the UK may also eventually need to step outside the comfort of the English-speaking world – though perhaps we will simply invite others to join it?

## **TRANSFORMATION CHALLENGES – IMPROVING IMPACT?**

Given the range, depth and insight reflected in great deal of educational research, it is a constant frustration that so little of it is apparently used. This issue is now being addressed in many ways and we have moved beyond the time when all responsibility seemed to be attributed to the research community. It is now understood that the social practices, constraints, incentivisation systems and understanding of groups such as civil servants, journalists, practitioners and politicians are also implicated. Further, models of change and impact are becoming increasingly sophisticated.

In my view, the *first* responsibility of educational researchers must be to the inherent quality of the research itself. Having said that, various strategies may be used to transform the knowledge into more usable forms, to disseminate and increase the chances of impact.

In terms of transformation, TLRP has been experimenting with its *Research Briefings*, *Commentaries* on contemporary issues, and its book series *Improving Learning* and *Improving Practice*. One group is working on the use of video-assets and another is exploring drama as a means of communicating its findings. TLRP also benefits from regular journalistic support and advice from organisations such as GTC (E) and CUREE. In such ways, we are able to offer practical support to project teams. We try to enhance our reach by drawing on our relationships with key user organisations and offering content which they can disseminate through their distribution systems. And we work to maintain networks of key contacts in many organisations across the UK – a frustrating business at times given the turnover of some governmental bodies and roles.

I think we have learned, above all, that such work is complex, time-consuming and skilled. In short, whilst little can be disseminated effectively without supportive academics, there is a real need for more professional infrastructures to support knowledge transformation, dissemination and impact for educational research nationally. Whilst most universities have press officers, very few academic institutions provide specialist support in relation to particular disciplines.

This would require the availability of specialist forms of expertise and may be best organised as a distinct form of provision providing services to and mediating between academic and user communities. Clearly, it would require national funding of some sort drawing across the multiple stakeholders and contributors which make the field so difficult to get a handle on at present. Interestingly, both NERF and the TTA have been thinking about related issues from the point of view of 'assembling evidence'. Thus we have emergent proposals for a 'National Evidence Centre', a 'National Evidence in Education Portal' and the provision of a 'Resource Bank' for teacher educators. My view is that they are correct in judging that specialist provision is required, but that the framing of the initiatives remains a little tainted

by past debates. In terms of the major challenge though, they are absolutely correct to identify the need. How should researchers respond and could UK governments be persuaded to support such provision? Given recent history, it is crucial that any new proposals are legitimated through authentic processes of consultation with relevant stakeholders. Provision which is seen to be 'independent' of, or at 'arms length', from government and/or political alignment is more likely to succeed in establishing itself.

## **UK OPPORTUNITY?**

I have briefly reviewed a range of challenges to educational research, and I am well aware of that the drivers of academic life and institutional development may not make it easy to meet these challenges.

The issues I've identified are, of course, mainly at what I judge to be at the cutting edge in the development of applied educational research (and I accept that some of the challenges facing the disciplines and practitioner enquiry are somewhat different). Given the UK's differentiated funding system, it is likely that the larger, research-intensive academic institutions will find it easier than less well-supported organisations to take forward some of these issues in a sustained way. Whilst we may regret this, we have little option but to accept structural realities about resourcing and circumstances, at least in the medium term. A necessary way forward may thus be in identifying and investing in complementary roles whilst also trying to develop strong inter-institutional relationships in different regions – a strategy which is currently being explored in the Welsh context.

One of the other difficulties within the field concerns the level of fragmentation with a plethora of weakly co-ordinated user organisations and agencies. TLRP is unusual in engaging with a significant number of such bodies, and two impressions are regularly reinforced. The first is of the basic integrity and commitment of colleagues working within each part of the education system. The second is of disconnection and lack of knowledge about others which exists, even where organisations may be broadly complementary. Whilst diversity may contribute to innovation, the potential for duplication of effort, waste of resource and confusion is also considerable. What scope, one wonders, might there be for forms of organisation which explicitly attempted to facilitate better communication, understanding and cooperation?

Of course, perspectives on educational research exist in government and academic circles in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales but there is no apparent strategic coordination or effective forum for collective discussion. Whilst England's NERF has considered a number of strategic issues in the past, it is nearing the end of its present funding and is now focusing on tangible activity to promote various strategies for continuation or succession.

There does seem to be something of a space emerging here, at a UK-wide level. Were I to be extremely bold, I would suggest that authentic UK organisations such as BERA and ESRC could exercise some leadership in exploring possibilities for facilitating discussion, cooperation and debate about cooperative approaches to some of the 'challenges' I have identified in this paper, and others. This is not something which government departments can easily do themselves on a whole-UK basis.

Is it time then, for the academic community to 'take the initiative' and to lead a new stage in the development of educational research? Is there a case for 'reflexive activism' on a UK scale?

For TLRP, looking forward, we will continue to work to build confidence in educational research and will use any resulting influence to promote a constructive approach to change and development in the field. We will promote recognition of the value, in principle, of diversity in research approaches in education, combined with recognition of the present imbalance in capacity for some forms of expertise. We will continue to argue that all forms of research should satisfy appropriate criteria of quality and will lead efforts to establish greater agreement on appropriate warrants. Whilst exploiting opportunities to use TLRP as a ‘test bed’, we will increasingly focus on sustainability issues.

As I put it in my SERA lecture:

TLRP is far from complacent. The only politically viable strategy is to move forward - to new forms of conceptualisation, new types of enquiry, new levels of expertise and new strategies for user engagement and research impact. This however, has to be achieved *with* colleagues within the field, and cannot be imposed *on* them. It must be founded on respect for existing expertise and on building a collective sense of purpose. We rely on the commitment of the UK’s educational researchers working open-mindedly together to improve the quality of teaching and learning, policy and practice. The most worthwhile stance, I would suggest, is one which recognises and respects the *complementary* roles and expertise of policy-makers, practitioners, researchers, the media and others.

The ultimate future-oriented goals of TLRP are to contribute both to a more capable, self-confident and respected body of researchers in this field, and to the improvement of knowledge about teaching and learning on which better educational policy and improved practices can be based.

Even if we achieve only a little of this, it will have been worth it.

## **NOTE**

The ideas contained in this paper have emerged from interaction with a very large number of people and organisations both within and beyond TLRP. I would like to thank colleagues for the opportunity to engage with them on these issues – which I regard as a significant privilege.

The text however, reflects my personal judgements and no other party should be held responsible.