

Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) Scientific Quality and Academic Impact Evaluation

By Eva L. Baker, Harold F. O'Neil, Rod Goodyear, Roxanne Sylvester, and Kilchan Choi, Advance Design Information

Executive summary

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned an evaluation of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), a multi-year effort to invigorate educational research in the United Kingdom (UK) using substantial awards to a range of collaborating investigators. This evaluation was focused on the evaluation of scholarly quality and research capacity building yielded by the TLRP. A second evaluation with another contractor is targeted to assess the impact of the TLRP on practice and policy. Specifically, this evaluation assessed through the use of multiple sources of evidence the following areas:

- the scientific quality and academic impact of the TLRP
- the impact of the TLRP on the UK's capacity to undertake high quality educational research
- the value-added by organising the research within a Programme
- the management and organisation of the Programme.

Background

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) was a £30 million United Kingdom (UK)-wide initiative funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England; the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Education); the Department of Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland; the Department of Education, Northern Ireland; the Scottish Government; and the Welsh Assembly. The TLRP was groundbreaking, not only in its complexity but in its very existence. Large-scale, multi-year, multi-site R&D efforts had been rare to nonexistent at this scale in the United Kingdom. The programme length was from 1999 to September 2009.

Evidence

Six major data sources of information were used to address the questions of this evaluation:

1. documentation provided by ESRC regarding the Programme
2. findings from an ADI computer-based questionnaire about the Programme
3. results of face-to-face informal interviews with individuals with TLRP connections
4. results of interviews with TLRP researchers conducted both face-to-face and by telephone
5. a bibliographic analysis of published scholarly research
6. a close reading of the research projects by Phase of the call.

The special data collections through questionnaires and interviews addressed all of the research questions. Scientific or scholarly quality of the projects was addressed by integrating five methods:

1. grades assigned by the ESRC Rapporteur on each project's final report and the most recent Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) findings
2. bibliographic analysis of published research reports in the scholarly literature
3. the questionnaire on TLRP effectiveness
4. the findings from the interview data
5. the analysis of the research products.

The questionnaire response rate fell short of expectations but was consistent with findings in the response rate literature. In addition, we were able to interview face to face a number of key respondents in the winter and spring, and in summer 2010 a substantial number of TLRP partners and leadership participated in prescheduled telephone calls using a protocol to guide the discussions. Only one of the respondents to these calls indicated they would have preferred a face-to-face discussion.

Analysis and results

The quality of the individual projects was judged positively by almost all sources and seen to represent extensive, appropriate efforts. The scholarly impact of the projects was harder to discern for a number of reasons. First, many projects undertook the goal to improve educational practice, as illustrated by the strong orientation to teaching and pedagogy, rather than to focus on knowledge production itself. Looking exclusively at the bibliographic metrics (which do not include many of the dissemination options undertaken by the TLRP), we note that with some frequency, publications were found in relatively low impact journals, meaning articles published in such journals are on average cited infrequently. This phenomenon may be explained in two ways. First, many journals specify topical interest and either imply or explicitly require a preferred methodology whereas TLRP research was often collaborative, involved multiple topics, and used mixed or interpretative methodology. The vast majority of the projects did not cite non-UK research evidence based on improved methodology. Second, much research was conducted in schools and attempted to influence educational practice. It may be argued that research focused on practice and conducted in less controlled educational settings is less attractive to some journals because findings are often complex rather than crystal clear. Furthermore, research on educational practice may not be considered as prestigious as research embedded in theory.

Another consideration is that the world of journal publication is rapidly changing as a function of the Internet. The TLRP website became well known internationally and was a source of influence, through personal presentations and electronic means without the typical delays associated with journal publication. Although peer-reviewed journal publication still remains a gold standard among many universities, the reality is that fewer libraries are acquiring journals either by hard copy or by e-subscription. Nonetheless, examination of the website, presentations at international conferences, and our questionnaire and interviews provide evidence that the TLRP had international impact, serving as a model for other countries to design research funding programmes.

Capacity-building effects were judged by responses of questionnaire and interview participants, who, with relatively few exceptions, were generally positive. Interviewees cited research capacity as a success, noting in particular activities that engendered interactions with mentors, critical

friends, thematic meetings, co-publication, and collaborative publishing. However, after funding was ended for many TLRP researchers, the question of whether capacity was sufficiently sustained must be raised. Some TLRP researchers found non-educational research positions or employment at less prestigious institutions, although contrary examples could be found.

What happened to those who were trained? At best, they will replace upcoming retirements in the future, but this outcome will depend upon there being positions in educational research available for them, and the implementation of the expansion or cutbacks of higher education itself, and support for think-tanks or other standalone R&D organisations. Continuing impact and development of research capacity cannot be separated from the availability of positions that value educational research supported by government or private funding.

With respect to value-added and the management and organisation of the Programme, it was almost universally agreed that without the TLRP there would have been far less high quality research in education, an existence proof of value in the inception and operation of the Programme. Respondents seemed to accept positively the roles of the Steering Committee and the TLRP leadership, although there was some blurring in interpretation of authority by some respondents. The ESRC role was valued because of the prestige associated with the organisation, and the clarity of expectations and fairness of reviews. Some interviewees opined that a more coherent set of projects might have been developed under other sets of commissioning and were concerned with the utility of some of the shorter projects and the variable flow of funding.

Was there value added given by the TLRP leadership? With the exception of a few who did not much participate in TLRP-sponsored group activities, the answer was a strong 'yes'. Our finding is that the Programme leadership served the TLRP in creative and assiduous ways and worked over and above expectations. Professor Andrew Pollard was mentioned as being responsive to complicated needs, for instance, the disproportionate English vs. other UK countries' participation. He was seen to work effectively and rapidly to solve problems. The Programme leadership were designers of Programme activities, including capacity-building components. Andrew Pollard was also thought to be influential in expressing TLRP goals and accomplishments to those outside the research community, particularly to the policy sector, in a fair and objective manner. Although this evaluation was not focused on educational policy, for instance, mandated changes in school practices, it may be said that many thought that the view of educational research by policymakers (who might have funding portfolios) was enhanced by the TLRP. Professor Mary James among others contributed to well-written commentaries intended to provide insight into findings but framed for a more general readership, and many in the Programme wrote consolidating volumes for prestigious publishers about the scope and meaning of their research endeavours. Research by others was featured in the press.

Conclusions

The TLRP was a complicated and not fully imagined activity at its outset. Under the auspices of the ESRC, the Steering Committee, and the Programme leadership and because of the hard work of the researchers themselves, it evolved and adapted to make an impact on UK educational research. The TLRP surfaced a broad discussion of methodologies appropriate for research in schools and other educational settings, stimulated collaborative research that is typically at odds with the methods by which universities distribute rewards, and demonstrated capacity and perseverance to work in the extraordinary and often volatile settings of environments, rife with changing personnel, students, and policies. The findings of many studies were provocative and illuminating, and demonstrated innovative methods.

Recommendations

Our recommendations fall into a number of categories including advice about expectations, suggestions about sustaining R&D in education, and opportunities to mine and exploit the investment made in the TLRP.

- Educational research should not be focused on short-term outcomes or disproportionately cut in lean times. If dramatic findings are not generally found, it is in part because of the structure of inductive logic and standards of evidence.
- The portfolio of goals for educational research and development should remain diverse. Focusing on the development of ‘interventions’ and their rigorous evaluation can be a part -but far from the majority - of investment.
 - Fundamental scholarship about learning, teaching, measurement, and background knowledge is valuable in and of itself. Because most of the TLRP research was conducted in practical settings, some policymakers believe this research should be transformed immediately into an applied procedure. On rare occasions this outcome may be possible.
- We recommend a continued investment in educational research conducted by educational researchers as well as others in the social science community. In addition, almost every scientist understands the importance of context or situation in deriving generalisations to undergird future scholarship.
- Educational researchers should be encouraged to remedy methodological shortfalls through the procurement process and the constraints of the tender.
 - Clarification of procedures for studies should be required.
 - Complexity must be understood through the use of mixed methods, a TLRP hallmark.

Strategic educational research investments

- If research is to yield sustainable knowledge, procurement needs to address not only more extended time frames (eg, 5 years at a minimum), but also a general focus, such as on sector, types of learners, types of learning, key functions (eg, teacher evaluation), or fundamental supports (eg, new measures and methodology).
 - By investing in mission-oriented centres, capacities are built in particular areas, and sources of expertise will emerge somewhat independent of current political preferences. For knowledge to be sustained, and the best drawn to its engagement, research needs continued insulation from politics, to the extent possible.
 - Long-term commitment to a particular effort, eg, mapping learning of school subjects, will generate the range of science and desired practical options.
 - Common focus (in Phase 3) on the adult sector resulted in quality research.
- Project leadership needs authority and responsibility.
 - Although the TLRP management did wonders, in view of their extensive responsibilities and enormous energy outputs, an expensive research investment that manages responsibility for focus and quality of work without the power to select projects sets up an inequitable situation.

- Priority goals must be set and monitored.
 - As research capacity was a principal goal, then goals, investment, and return should be part of the ongoing evaluation of progress. For example, at key points, for instance, the end of Phases of the calls, evidence of the impact of systematic training of new researchers and the apprenticeship and mentoring models used in the TLRP would be desirable. In addition, potential employing institutions of high calibre researchers should participate in various capacity-building activities.
 - In turbulent economic situations, training for capacity may need to expand beyond traditional university-focused research, to include R&D skills useful in the non-profit, commercial, and (where appropriate) government sectors.

Exploiting TLRP Findings and Learning

- Creating and sustaining extant technological communities, particularly international interactions, should be continued in order to provide continuity.
- Small projects might be funded that are targeted to consolidate findings in a particular topic area.
- Exploitation of tools developed by TLRP projects could be achieved by short course training sessions, in person or mediated electronically.
- Policy-relevant commentaries should be sustained and, with quality reviews, widely disseminated to educate researchers, policymakers, the public, and school personnel about new developments in the UK or elsewhere.

We realise the implementation of the recommendations will be challenging due to reduced budgets for research in the UK. The recently published ESRC Delivery Plan: 2011-2015 represents a reduction of 12 per cent of the ESRC budget over the next four years. Further, as stated in the plan, it represents a prioritisation of funding into three areas:

- economic performance and sustainable growth - enable the development of robust government and private sector strategies to ensure the sustainable growth of the UK economy
- influencing behaviour and informing intervention - create a better understanding of how and why people and organisations make decisions, and how these can be managed or influenced
- a vibrant and fair society - develop ways to enhance the role and contributions of citizens, voluntary sector organisations, and social enterprises to create a vibrant national and global society.

The focus of (2) appears to be on decision making in general rather than teaching and learning in particular.