

Reflections on ‘The Contribution of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative’

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This paper presents some reflections on Zepke and Leach’s discussion paper, *The Contribution of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative to Building Knowledge About Teaching and Learning*. It is not intended as a critique or review of that paper, but rather briefly ponders some of the points and questions Zepke and Leach’s work raised in my mind – many of which are also noted by the authors themselves. Although raised in the context of the TRLI, these are also applicable to tertiary education research in New Zealand more generally.

It should be noted that this paper represents my personal thoughts during the reading of Zepke and Leach’s work – it does not constitute the official view of Ako Aotearoa or its Board. Similarly, while I appreciate and have drawn on comments from and discussion with the Centre’s previous Interim and current incoming Directors,¹ it does not necessarily represent their views either.

With those caveats in place, there are five areas or themes within the paper that I think are worth further discussion:

- topics for research;
- methodology issues;
- sector presence;
- impact, outputs, and dissemination; and
- non-funded projects.

Topic for Research

The first issue discussed by Zepke and Leach in their paper covers ‘what was researched’ – in other words, the topics explored by projects funded through the TLRI. Here, I would like to take some issue with the authors’ conclusions that there is a lack of coherence in what has been funded. Indeed, the cluster analysis seems to show that there is a reasonable level of congruence between topic areas (particularly given the authors’ note that many projects could be linked to more than one cluster), and the authors themselves show how these can be clustered even more tightly into three themes.

Instead, it seems to me that the key point to emerge from the discussion paper is that, as the authors note, there are probably some significant gaps in what the TLRI is funding. If one of

¹ Drs Sue Walbran and Peter Coolbear respectively.

the aims of the TLRI is to move the field of tertiary education, we need to be identifying what aspects are not being looked at in depth, and encourage more work in those areas. Where there is already significant existing research, it may be more appropriate to focus on instead supporting the synthesis of existing knowledge rather than significant new work.

However, it seems problematic to focus on what is currently being published in academic journals, and use that as the basis for identifying gaps within the TRLI and therefore areas where more work should be encouraged. This approach may run the risk of simply replicating 'academic fashions' within the Initiative, rather than focusing on where, strategically, the TLRI can have an impact on teaching and learning outcomes in New Zealand. Given that the first principle of the TLRI is that the work it supports will relate to important strategic themes for education in New Zealand, this would seem to be something of a misstep.

For example, Zepke and Leach highlight ICT, International Students, and policy dimensions as specific topic gaps, but I would also draw attention to the concentration of the surveyed projects in the degree-plus space. While there are a few exceptions, most of these projects have focused on – for want of a better terminology – 'higher' rather than 'further' education. Given that in 2010 56% of our learners in tertiary education providers were studying at levels 1-6, and a further 195,000 people were engaged in workplace training, to focus so strongly on levels 7+ seems somewhat misplaced.

Similarly, with the exception of Māori and Pasifika, there is comparatively little focus in the surveyed TLRI projects on the needs of particular groups of learners. Where are the research projects that specifically focus on the needs of 'first-generation', part-time, or adult learners? The 'teaching international students' theme identified by the authors through their thematic gap analysis is of clear relevance to the New Zealand context, but so are the needs of these other learner groups.

Clearly, there will always be tensions in research funding between directed and non-directed models. Zepke and Leach state that it "is no bad thing" (p17) that personal research agendas appear to dominate the tertiary education research landscape. But if this results in the neglect of important areas where research could potentially have a dramatic impact on outcomes for learners in our tertiary system, then surely we do have a problem. Relying on state agencies to directly commission research on important topics would not only appear to conflict with the first principle of the TLRI, but also raises a large number of practical issues – not least of which is the assumption that these agencies have the funding available to commission such research.

Methodology Issues

The second point I would like to touch on is Zepke and Leach's statements around methodology. Without delving too far into the murky territory of 'Methodology Wars', different approaches have different strengths and weaknesses, and few would disagree that – all else being equal – a field that makes use of a variety of methodologies is better-placed than one that draws on only a few. Indeed, we at Ako Aotearoa have in the past noted that it would be good to see more diversity in research approaches amongst the proposals we receive.

However, Zepke and Leach's point that "variety of design for variety's sake is not good research" (p18), is worth keeping in mind here, and their discussion raises at least two key questions. Firstly, if there is a relatively constrained set of methodologies, methods, and approaches being used by tertiary education researchers, *why* is this the case? Is it that the research being undertaken can only appropriately be undertaken through these methodologies? Is it simply that researchers are not aware of different approaches? Or is it that those who choose to research within tertiary education are largely drawn from a pool of researchers who consciously prefer to utilise the types of approaches outlined by Zepke and Leach.

Assuming that the first of these situations is not the case, the second and third point to very different strategies for building diversity. If the first situation is the case, then the 'answer' to uniformity is relatively simple (although possibly concerning in terms of our wider research training system): we need to engage in some form of education activity. If the second holds, however, then encouraging methodological diversity becomes significantly more complex, and may be a product of disciplinary research cultures. In this case, encouraging diversity may be best achieved through encouraging a wider group of researchers to explore in research into tertiary education practice, and building links across disciplines with different cultures.

The second key question raised by foregrounding methodology is whether or not encouraging methodological diversity is currently as important as encouraging methodological *quality*. In other words, are we confident enough in how the dominant methodologies and methods in this field are deployed – and that their underlying epistemological/ theoretical perspectives are well-enough understood – that we can feel comfortable encouraging people to use new ones? Or should our first concern be to ensure that researchers are effectively using the ones to which they have gravitated?

It may be the case that by focusing on the range of methods currently used in tertiary education research, we lose sight of the key underlying issue around methodology – quality and appropriateness of use. This is unlikely to be as much of an issue specifically with the TLRI – as a contestable funding pool, it is reasonable to assume that the selection process will address these points – but it is something that needs to be borne in mind when considering where our priorities for action lie.

This quality issue also has implications that need to be grappled with when considering the desirability of increasing diversity. If we are encouraging researchers to use a range of methods other than those with which they are comfortable, we need to accept that they may require additional support. In practical terms, this may equate to additional funding for multiple research mentors, or additional team members.

Sector Presence

The third area raised through paper is that of the sectors engaged in research into tertiary education – and particularly the dominance of universities. Not only were universities the lead researchers on 11 of the 15 surveyed projects, no university took part in a project that was not university-led.

The prominence of universities is not necessarily a negative – universities are, after all, our primary repositories of research expertise within a sector.² But it does raise the issue of the extent to which our tertiary education research landscape may end up being captured by universities, and the impact that this may have on the areas that get researched, particular.

As mentioned above, despite the fact that the vast majority of tertiary education in New Zealand takes place below degree level, most of the projects reviewed appear to have been focused on degree-level study – i.e. the sort of study supported by universities. It is encouraging that many of the university-led projects included ITPs and/or Wānanga as partners. However, if other sectors are not encouraged to pursue their own research agenda, and if they are always a subordinate player in inter-institutional research relationships, then we do run the risk of developing a ‘top-heavy’ research agenda that concentrates on the needs of those at higher levels over those in other parts of the tertiary system.

Three particular sectors notable by their absence from the TLRI are PTEs, the ACE sector, and ITOs. These are all significant players in tertiary education (indeed, industry training is the largest single sector in New Zealand’s tertiary education system), and yet with the exception of one PTE and one ACE provider being included in Zepke & Leach’s Learning Environments work, and the literacy providers involved in the CABERN project, they are absent from the surveyed projects.

This situation may not only affect the overall research landscape, but also the potential impact and reach of the work that is undertaken. As one example, the 2007 Coll-led project on ‘Work Integrated Learning’ is an excellent piece of work, and yet two of the largest sectors that could benefit from its insights – the PTE and ITO sectors – were not involved. This is not a flaw in the research itself, but it does point to an area that could have significantly strengthened the potential outcomes from the project.

Impact, Outputs, and Dissemination

This leads into a further issue, that of research outputs and impacts on tertiary teaching. The first question here of these is the extent to which we can say that these projects are – in line with the principles of the TLRI – building cumulative knowledge. Zepke and Leach show that the work from these projects is being published, cited, and accepted for conferences, presentations etc. However, this still leaves open the question as to whether this work is actually *building* cumulative knowledge, or whether it is simply *adding* to knowledge. Does the work being produced through these projects significantly challenge or make a new contribution to our existing understanding of tertiary education, or is it a relatively small addition to a large and established body of knowledge?

It should be noted that this issue is separate from the issue of quality *per se*. It is hardly controversial to say that a well-designed, robust project that explores a well-trodden path and reinforces the dominant evidence or perspectives in an area, may not have the same impact on a field as a piece of work with some (moderate) flaws but that has been undertaken on an under-researched area or in a new manner. The first such case adds to

² Although it should be noted that under the current Tertiary Education Strategy ITPs also have an explicit research role – particularly with regard to research that supports their teaching.

what we already know, and confirms existing approaches or perspectives, but the second – even though it may have problems – may draw attention to valuable new avenues on which later research can build.

The second point here relates to the *impact* of research into tertiary education. While it is good to see that the work of the surveyed projects is being cited, we don't know – as Zepke and Leach acknowledge – the extent to which this work is being taken up and having an effect on the actual practice of tertiary education. This is a key aim of the TLRI; Principle Five refers to research funded through the Initiative needing to be connected to practice and having clear potential outcomes for learners. Unfortunately, it is also often seen as something that is primarily the responsibility of those outside the research community.

Tied in with this is the question of who the audiences for research should be, and how best to communicate with them. While conference presentations and peer-reviewed publications are the output with which many teams might be most familiar and comfortable and provide a good avenue for reaching fellow researchers, it seems at best unlikely that this is the best method of influencing the behaviour of teachers or tutors. In Ako Aotearoa's experience, developing 'practical' outputs, such as workshops, 'plain-language' guides etc. are often more useful for engaging with even other academic practitioners than more 'traditional' methods.

This is not to say, however, that the responsibility for impact in this sense lies completely with researchers, and this is an area where the funders of research must recognise that they have a role to play. If funding and commissioning bodies want to see the best results from the research that they fund, then they must take some responsibility for supporting research teams to engage effectively with potential users of their work. Similarly, there seems scope for more *Best Evidence Synthesis*-type work; drawing together existing research in a way that makes it accessible to non-specialists.

This issue – how we can translate research into practical change – needs to be one of the core future strategic priorities for the tertiary education research community. This is not only a 'moral' imperative, but also a bluntly realistic one. We are in a period of constrained research funding, and this seems unlikely to change in the near future. If we are to be able to effectively justify the continuation of funding for tertiary education research, we need to be able to 'make the case' for this support – not just to each other, but to officials, the public, and to politicians. If we cannot point to clear impacts from the research we support and undertake, we risk losing the limited funding we have available.

What About the Unfunded Projects?

In conclusion, I would like to raise one final point that was outside the scope of Zepke and Leach's paper. The authors were commissioned to provide an overview of projects that were funded through the TLRI. However, what about the projects that were *not* selected for funding. What sectors were they from? What areas were they aiming to explore? And, perhaps most critically, why were they not selected for funding?

Looking at these factors may illuminate some of the points above, and will provide us with a better picture of the state of research into tertiary education teaching and learning in New Zealand. For example, to return to the discussion of sectors, are there particular types of

tertiary organisations that rarely apply for funding? If so, this may point to the need for targeted work to publicise the TLRI – and perhaps the relevance of tertiary education research more generally. Similarly, very different conclusions about the state of tertiary education research capability can be drawn if the funded projects represent the cream from a very high-quality and competitive pool, than if they constitute a few bright lights followed by a significant tail.