



# TLRI tertiary symposium: a summary

## 22 November 2011

On 22 November 2011 an invited group from the tertiary education sector met at a symposium hosted by the TLRI. The aim was to explore what we have learnt about teaching and learning in the tertiary sector through the collective work of the TLRI, including where the gaps were and what the priorities should be for the fund in the future.

This paper seeks to capture the main themes that emerged from the day. Its purpose is to draw on the collective expertise of the tertiary sector participants to contribute to the future development of the TLRI. Two papers were commissioned and circulated before the meeting in order to help inform the discussion and they should be read alongside this summary. Nick Zepke and Linda Leach of Massey University were asked to review the 15 TLRI projects that have been carried out in the tertiary sector to date. Their paper is called *The contribution of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative to building knowledge about teaching and learning: A review of tertiary sector projects 2003–2011*. Ako Aotearoa was invited to provide a response to their paper. *Reflection on “Contribution of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative”* was written by Nicholas Huntingdon, Ako Aotearoa senior policy analyst and Ako Aotearoa director Peter Coolbear spoke to the report at the meeting.

## The papers

Nick Zepke and Linda Leach gave an overview of their paper, explaining the approach they had taken to examining the 15 TLRI projects with a tertiary education focus. They saw some connections in the ideas being explored across the projects and evidence in some projects of cumulative knowledge building in the field. However, they felt there was limited coherence between them, little referencing of each other’s work and they expressed a concern that projects are not building upon one another in the way expressed in the aims of the TLRI. They also noted little alignment between the projects and current policy agendas, and found a limited range of both methodologies and data gathering methods used across the projects, with a lack of quantitative work. They suggested this may be restricting the information gathered and, in turn, limiting the insights generated about teaching and learning.

Ako Aotearoa director Peter Coolbear explored the TLRI through the lens of Ako Aotearoa’s National Project Fund (NPF), which aims to support evidence-based enhancements in teaching and learning practice. He noted that all NPF projects began with the intention of making an impact on practice, but that probably only half of them would do so. There were some successful collaborations through the fund but they tended to last only for the duration of the project.

He made the point that the best of teaching and learning practice in New Zealand is world-class, so there needed to be a way of capturing that in the research.

Other issues with NPF projects included insufficient focus on practice improvement, use of a single methodology and ignoring some key data sources, inadequate sampling strategies and results that could not be generalised.

Ako Aotearoa is considering ways to get greater ownership from organisations in projects at an early stage, through a financial contribution and a real partnership. Ako Aotearoa would prefer to have the relationship with organisations, rather than with research offices. Symposium participants questioned whether this could be achieved but noted it could be a way to differentiate the NPF from the TLRI.

## Issues

After the overview of the commissioned paper and the response from Ako Aotearoa, the symposium continued with a general discussion. The issues raised can be grouped under four categories.

### *Ways of working*

There was a lot of discussion about TLRI research teams: how they come together, how to build capacity, how to sustain them and how institutions can better support them. The point was made that the projects that are most successful in delivering as proposed have good design and good teams. There is coherence within the research team and often one person who keeps driving the project.

In other cases there is little infrastructure around projects to ensure, for example, that they run on time. Some do not have the kind of project management input that they need. This may not be part of an academic's training or they may not have access to good project management tools. Some people are able to hold both project management and research roles but often one will be dropped. In the TLRI the contract is with the organisation rather than the individuals involved and the quality assurance that has been promised doesn't always happen.

There was a feeling that things needed to be done differently to build stronger teams capable of sticking together and of spreading ideas both between and beyond the group. There needs to be more than one-off projects that people move on from as soon as they are completed. The question of ownership of projects was raised – is the project leader committed to it as part of ongoing body of work? This means keeping the project and its ongoing outcomes as a priority even after completion of the contract and as they do other things.

Several people raised the issue of support from TLRI for PhDs or post-doctoral work. This was seen as a real gap in the sector and a reason why post-docs end up going overseas. TLRI projects are partnerships rather than funds for personal projects but the point was made that in any projects, there will be a degree of personal benefit to the researchers involved, such as boosting their PBRF rating. If TLRI is seen as funding to help build a research community, there could be a case to include funding a post-doc. The TLRI needs to look at where it is trying to build capacity and target that in some way. Finding innovative ways to grow PhDs and post docs can have a wide transformational impact, for example as evidenced in the Māori research community.

### *The location and focus of the research*

Over half of all students in the tertiary sector are not in degree programmes, yet much of the TLRI research is at the degree level. As well, universities are not involved in projects unless they are leading them. There was a lot of interest in knowing more about teaching and learning practices in lower level qualifications and in settings such as industry training organisations and private training organisations. These sectors are particularly relevant to the experiences of Māori and Pasifika learners. However, researchers in these sectors do not necessarily have expertise at proposal writing and research design. There was a sense that it is difficult for applicants to succeed if they are not coming from a university context. The TLRI might need to be more explicit about what support it can offer underrepresented groups.

There were a number of comments that TLRI research tended to be overly concerned with the teaching rather than the learning and that it would be good to change that, even to the extent of changing the name to the learning initiative. Most students only spend 20 percent of their time in actual teaching situations, and yet their learning is going on at other times. “Students will be learning, often despite the teaching,” was one comment. Too much focus on teaching means learning in other contexts is not captured in the research.

A number of participants called for greater clarity from the TLRI about the research it wants to fund. It was felt there was currently a diverse spread of projects and a degree of ‘fishing’ going on. “The fund could specify more closely what it wanted to achieve.”

One participant questioned the influence of the application process on the type of projects that get funded. “Is it possible that the application process has a kind of closing-down effect on innovation, on slightly risky projects?”

### *The impact of the research: “Is dissemination the right word?”*

How much impact does TLRI research have now and how could it have more? Some participants challenged the term dissemination, on the grounds that it was passive. It is not enough to put research onto a website and expect people to come and find it. In the TLRP [UK] fund, researchers are expected to think about audience right at the beginning of a project and to have ways to communicate to different groups. There was support for the changes the TLRI has made in this direction already, such as no longer necessarily requiring a final full report in favour of more targeted publications.

Research findings need to be accessible and communicated in dynamic ways, including through social marketing methods such as Facebook and Twitter. Participants felt it may be unrealistic to expect the people involved in the research to have the ability to take it to different audiences. This may require a different skill set. Equally, the person with the best approach to theory is probably not the person to get change in organisation. Some of that kind of expertise might usefully sit within Ako Aotearoa or NZCER.

Participants felt we need to know more about the legacy of projects, six months or two years on. Sometimes this might mean leaving a bigger gap between the final report and then going back to the researchers some time later.

Another way to generate greater impact is to ensure that New Zealand-based research work is referenced more comprehensively than it is now. Currently TLRI researchers are more likely to reference overseas sources than their own colleagues.

Participants emphasised the big difference between dissemination and creating change. “Do we want it to be disseminated, heard and understood by a variety of people, or do we actually want to create change?”

Alternative terms such as sustaining, embedding and upscaling the findings of research were put forward.

One participant made the point that the outcome of a particular research project is not a reason on its own for change. It can take 50 years for great research to make an impact. The tertiary sector research in the TLRI consists of only 15 projects over quite a short period of time, so it is difficult to assess its impact.

Another commented that in other areas of research beyond education, factors that are used to measure impact include: did people learn something new, did they share it; did they use it to inform policy and practice?

### *Notions of partnership*

Partnership is central to the TLRI. What does it mean in the tertiary space? The question posed to the symposium was that the idea of research involving something being done ‘to’ not ‘with’ seems more common in the tertiary sector than elsewhere, an approach that was inconsistent with the TLRI.

Several participants commented that it was more helpful to focus on the partnership as a whole, rather than make the distinction between the researcher and the practitioner, which can be vague in the tertiary sector. The important element is that all members of the team are learning new things through the work.

“If it’s a partnership, then all contribute. We are all practitioners and all researchers.” In an effective partnership the roles might develop so that some people are practitioners most of the time and sometimes researchers. It should be flexible rather than something set in concrete.

“I have been mentored by some practitioners where they know far more than I do,” was one comment. Another referred to a project in which everyone was described as a researcher practitioner.

Others questioned how to ensure that research capability was being built. How the different roles would be negotiated and possibly change over time would need to be spelt out, as well as how people were going to learn during the project. There can also be tensions between the two roles, for example when the opportunity to gather data is not compatible with being the best teacher. The practitioner needs to protect the interests of students.

Another commented that placing primary emphasis on partnership rather than worrying about the researcher-practitioner roles could make sense in the workplace learning sector, where practitioner is often not quite the right term.

Cultural activity theory may provide a useful framework. “There are lots of roles, the roles we’re most interested in are practitioner and researcher, we’re looking for change and change needs to be sustainable and build capacity and enable effective learning.”

## Gaps in the research

Participants were asked to comment on the gaps in the tertiary sector research funded by the TLRI and what they would most like to see tackled over the next five years. A number of comments and ideas were put forward.

- The current measures of the impact of the tertiary sector fail to recognise the complexity of the impact on individuals, not just the student body as a whole. There's a need to provide alternative ways of demonstrating the impact of what we do and the nature of the impact. We have to demonstrate impact, in an environment where funding is tight.
- Fundamental descriptive theorising work, broadly focussed on student experience.
- More projects focussed on student learning, without the explicit teaching focus.
- The conditions for learning. Many institutions provide environments with IT facilities and call it a learning centre. The assumption is that learning is going on but we have no idea if it is fostering learning. There is a huge amount of work to be done on learning space design.
- The multiple transitions students are making, from secondary to tertiary, from directed learners to independent learners. How do we support them? How do they understand the transition process?
- A major part of experience for many students is that at some point, they run out of money. What impact does that have?
- Research that makes the familiar strange, so that familiar things can be seen in a new light.
- More complexity theorising and less emphasis on immediate impacts.
- Some projects located in places where change is occurring. The way institutions are working is changing, as are their programmes.
- What happens when real engagement in learning occurs? What impact does it have on student ongoing involvement in learning, on the impact on whanau, hapu etc? What is the flow-on effect when one member of the family gets the first degree?
- Policy change and its impact on the sector. For example: reduced contact time; reductions in foundation programmes; and the long term effect of any potential scaling back of tertiary participation. There was a view that some of the current policy drivers carry with them a risk of reducing academic standards.
- One piece of historical scholarship funded each year, so we know whose shoulders we stand on.

There was also discussion about methodological gaps. Ako Aotearoa has asked people to say what student outcomes they want and how they will measure them but the response has often been that this is too difficult. This raises questions about methodological restrictions, the use of models of change and/or outcomes hierarchies and the need for more innovative approaches.

Participants discussed who were the gurus in different methodologies in the NZ education landscape, and in the broader social sciences. How do we individually and collectively build more capacity? How do we keep learning? Participants felt there would be interest in the TLRI coordinating an event on different methodologies. Funders need to encourage people to move beyond survey methods. The fund could send quite powerful signals about what would be useful or what it has seen enough of. It could ask whether a project involves methodological innovation and how will it be sustained.

However there was also a note of caution sounded against funding being driven by a focus on methodology. The methodology has to suit the research question.

## Suggested strategies for strengthening the TLRI

- Processes for sharing data sets from research projects. Sometimes the data sets are more valuable than the published report and groups with good data should be looking at how it can be shared for maximum impact. There was interest in more secondary and meta-analysis of data.
- More feedback from research teams, for example, to Māori communities. There was interest in a Māori research symposium.
- More research in the tertiary sector beyond universities, including vocational education and training and provision of research expertise and support, e.g. for application writing or research design.
- Provide good feedback to TLRI proposals. Inevitably people will propose research with problems in it that can be addressed. The fund could also sometimes put different research teams together.
- If research themes are to be introduced at the application stage, it needs to be done in a transparent way or could be seen as politically or agency driven. There was support for the fund being very clear about what it is looking for from researchers.
- Find a way to develop research teams that are sustainable and go beyond one-off projects. Build a research community, including room for PhDs and post-docs.
- It would be great to have a “*ser*”-type publication for the tertiary sector, taking tertiary research and writing it for practitioners and making it freely available.
- Use a mix of short and long term strategies to get gains. Short term, find champions, such as Deans of Education, and target them to spread the research. Longer term, academic publications will be effective.
- Keep up the deep reflective process that TLRI does – because that means there will be change.
- There was support for Ako Aotearoa and the TLRI working together, but participants also appreciated their different niches and unique contributions.