



# Application and evolution

*ROBYN BAKER explains how the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative is evolving*

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Teaching and Learning Research Initiative

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At this time each year, we call for robust research proposals that fit the brief of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI). It's an exciting time as we await the initial plans – the expressions of interest phase – and then work through the selection process.

The TLRI has always been sharply focused on teaching and learning and that has not changed. We're looking for research projects that will build collective knowledge about teaching and learning across the early childhood, school and tertiary sectors. The fund is also specifically designed to grow research capability and capacity, and to forge partnerships between researchers and practitioners.

The focus on teaching and learning is similar to the National Project Funding Round run by Ako Aotearoa, though TLRI's scope extends beyond the tertiary sector. Ako Aotearoa director Peter Coolbear has written about the shortcomings evident in many of the applications in its first major funding round (*Education Review*, February 13). His comments pick up many of the same issues the TLRI has grappled with and in some cases worked through since the fund's inception.

For us, it's been a careful and gradual process of review and change, but the satisfying thing is we are seeing results. There was a noticeable strengthening of research proposals in the 2008 round. The research community – those managing and advising on funding, and the applicants – are all learning. That learning takes time because it occurs not just in terms of getting the high level aims right, but in how they interpreted within the context of each particular research initiative.

Right from the beginning, we've provided detailed feedback to each applicant, as well as an overall summary of both strengths and limitations of applications. But over time we realised that while we had many strong applications each year, we were not meeting the aims of the initiative as well as we had hoped.

There were three areas of concern to us. Firstly, the partnership model had been interpreted by many teams as one that required teachers to learn to do research and researchers to learn about teaching teachers to do research. These are important aspects but we found that this focus often limited the scope and importance of the actual research question or questions. That in turn had an impact on the analysis and reporting that emerged from the project, and on the generation of new knowledge.

Secondly, while the TLRI was designed to increase research capacity in New Zealand, it didn't seem to be happening at the expected rate. Experienced researchers continued to be more successful in receiving funding and there was insufficient evidence that less experienced researchers were being mentored so that in time they might win funding as a principal investigator.

The third concern centred on dissemination. Project teams interpreted our reporting specifications as requiring them to write detailed research reports. We felt more needed to be done to reach practitioners, and that would require more expansive dissemination strategies.

We took a two-pronged approach, commissioning an external review of the TLRI, and also undertaking our own analysis of our selection documentation, the applications, and the research reports. The result was that in 2008 we gave potential applicants more guidance, especially in areas where we were seeking to have a greater impact.

Two aspects were particularly important. Firstly, we were more explicit in our requirements about research design. If we were to both build new knowledge and build capacity, we argued that we needed to support very well designed studies where experienced and emerging researchers learn together. In one of the two types of research projects sought we explicitly required plans for the mentoring of the less experienced researchers.

At the same time we refined our focus on partnerships. The collective expertise of both researchers and practitioners is still central to the research design and implementation of the project, but the teaching of research methodologies to practitioners is not a central activity. Secondly, we were keen to place more focus on building cumulative knowledge by projects building on previous New

Zealand research and current priorities. We made this task easier by collating all the previous and current TLRI projects, so that applicants could see what had been done before and where there was work to build on. We also talked to experienced educational scholars about what they saw as the current research priorities – the important areas where we need to deepen our understanding, and the areas where there are gaps in our knowledge that need addressing. So far those interviews have looked at the broad areas of early childhood, schooling, and tertiary, and this year we've asked two prominent Maori educational researchers for their views of priorities in that area.

This information is included in the expression of interest application packs and is on the TLRI website. A final change was made to the project reporting requirements with additional support being given from the coordination team for dissemination to practitioner audiences.

So what did we find in the first year with these revised specifications? The applications were certainly much stronger, which of course made the selection process even more difficult. The successful applications were those prepared by teams who not only had a very clear understanding of the TLRI, but who also were collectively knowledgeable about the proposed area of study and the respective strengths of members of the project team. They were able to locate their proposed research within the relevant literature and concerns of the day, and to indicate how the expertise of different members of the project team might contribute to successful implementation.

The stronger applications also had coherent and convincing research designs and well thought out approaches to data analysis. They detailed their quality assurance processes, rather than just stating that such processes existed. This collective information about research design and methodology gave the selectors confidence that the proposed project would provide robust and substantive findings. The strongest proposals also showed strategic thinking about the funding type and category based on project size and research design. For example, those applying for the largest funding category demonstrated that they were offering good value for money by describing projects in which the larger and more expensive research designs led to bigger possible outcomes and more significant practice and research impacts. The changed partnership requirements focused applicants on the nature of the partnership they were proposing and also on the ways they intended to work together.

The changes to dissemination will take longer to flow through but we already have some exciting models for ensuring that the research findings reach the intended audiences.

As we seek proposals for the 2009 funding round, we are confident we will see further evidence of a research community that is strengthening its understanding of project design, its strategic sense of research priorities in terms of the TLRI, and its ideas for getting its research findings noticed.

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