

A Social and Professional Network for Early Career Researchers in Education

Project Grant Holders: Dr. Patrick Carmichael, Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies, University of Cambridge; Dr. Chris Taylor, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University

Summary

This project will offer early career researchers in education the opportunity to take part in the 'co-configuration' of their own sustainable network and the online tools that enable and enhance it, based on high quality resources developed by the TLRP and Research Capacity Building Network and realised using emerging models of 'social software'.

Aims

The project aims are as follows:

- To research the specific needs of early career researchers and the respects in which these are similar and different from those of other groups of researchers and professionals
- To research the factors contributing to the development of sustainable networks of early career researchers in education
- To explore the perceived and realised affordances of different forms of online support and social networking applications to early career researchers in education
- To develop methods to maximise the reach and impact of capacity building resources and activities through network development
- To research how best networks can be conceptualised to support their further development and contribution to individual and collective research capacity

The Significance of the research

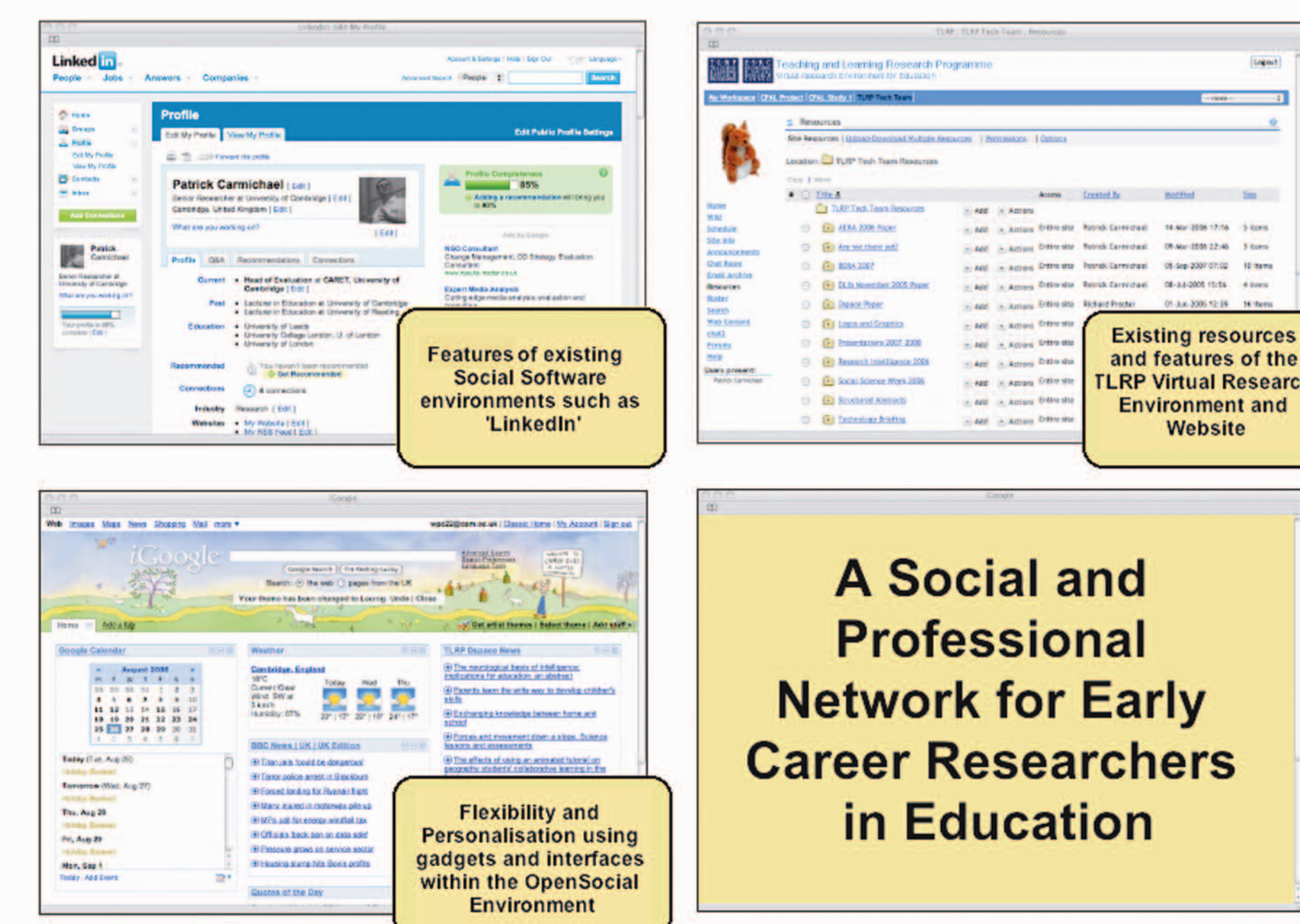
The JISC/TLRP 'Virtual Research Environment (VRE) for Education' project (2005-2007) explored the potential of online 'Virtual Research Environments' to support the work of education researchers who were participating in the intensive collaboration characteristic of research projects.

At the same time, this work demonstrated how important it was that educational researchers (especially those early in their careers) maintain links with mentors, colleagues and contacts in order to develop

professionally and further their careers. While formal training and development play a part in the professional development of educational researchers, much of their learning takes place informally and in less well-defined environments, and that personal networks are vital as a means of accessing and sharing knowledge, training, advice, resources and opportunities.

Early career researchers in education are understood to include young researchers, many contract researchers, experienced practitioners embarking upon research careers and those undertaking research as part of Masters' and Doctoral programmes. They may be employed on short term contracts or be paid per day or per hour; be part time or hold multiple posts; be highly mobile; work from home; and may lack full access to institutional infrastructures and services. Support for their networks, including online environments, needs to be sufficiently flexible that they allow them (independent of institutional systems) to:

- maintain personal resources securely and for indefinite periods
- collaborate intensively with other researchers, participants and research 'users' in the context of specific research projects
- build and maintain networks of people, resources, services and information providers
- represent themselves, their competences, work and interests to others including potential employers and collaborators



Social Software and the 'OpenSocial' Model

Social Software or 'Web 2.0' environments such as Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) or LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>) provide users with opportunities to develop an online environment that they can customise to their particular needs, organising personal, social and resource-oriented content within an intuitive web-browser based interface.

An important recent development is Google's 'OpenSocial' framework (<http://code.google.com/apis/opensocial/>). This has provided a basis for the development of cross-platform interfaces, applications and 'gadgets' which will work across Social Software applications.

Rather than using existing Social Software environments to provide 'third party' support for networking, the project will identify the most appropriate features of Social Software applications and, using the OpenSocial framework, will extend the facilities offered by the existing TLRP 'Virtual Research Environment'. This will provide researchers with a flexible interface to resources and services as well as allowing them to interact with other users and share personal information.

Project Activities and Schedule

The project will organise a series of workshops that will offer early career researchers the opportunity to:

- Take part in high-quality research symposia and training activities drawing on the resources of the ESRC Research Capacity Building Network
- Work with project staff and other early career researchers to identify areas of common interest
- Take part in 'envisioning' and design activities to inform the development of OpenSocial applications to address their needs as researchers

These activities, together with a systematic review of current provision and potential Social Software applications, will inform the development of a number of online tools to enhance and extend current 'Virtual Research Environments' so that they can support the kinds of network activities required by early career researchers. These will be integrated into the TLRP/BERA Virtual Research Environment by Summer 2009.

Project Team:

Patrick Carmichael

(Project Director and Principal Investigator) is head of Research and Evaluation at CARET in Cambridge. He has been Principal Investigator on several ESRC projects and is Director of 'Ensemble' a joint ESRC/EPSC Technology Enhanced Learning project that will explore the potential of the Semantic Web for the Enhancement of Case-Based Learning.

Chris Taylor

(Project Co-Director) was the manager of the ESRC-funded Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) Research Capacity Building Network (RCBN) and is Deputy Director of QUALITI - part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.

Helen Burchmore

(Project Researcher) is an experienced education researcher with a background in museum education and online community development. She worked on the ESRC/EPSC Project 'Transforming Perspectives: Technologies for the Teaching and Learning of Threshold Concepts' and on the Cambridge-MIT Institute's Teaching for Learning Network.

The Software Development and Systems teams at CARET, and other participants from existing TLRP and NCRM networks, will support this core team during the course of the project.

Contact details

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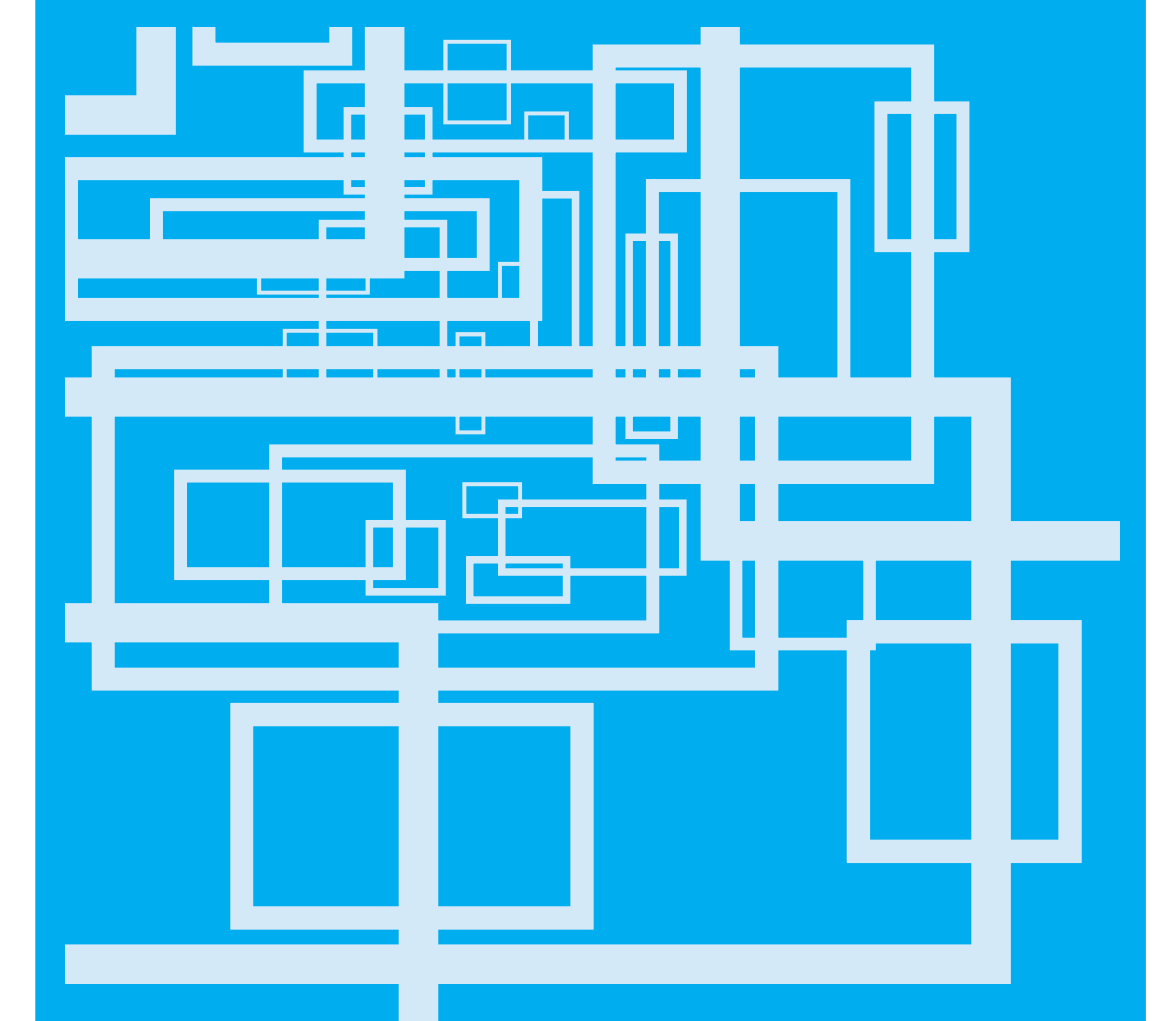
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Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves some 90 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and the Technology Enhanced Learning phase will continue to 2012.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is 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, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research informed policy and practice.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

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