

WALES COUNTRY REPORT

SFRE Forum II

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Introduction

The contents of this report, although the sole responsibility of the author, have been informed by responses to a semi-formal consultation conducted with researchers and key stakeholders in Wales. The author is grateful to those who responded to this request for information, and respondents are acknowledged at the end of the report.

The stimulus report prepared for Forum I concluded with the observation that education research in Wales was not in good health (Daugherty and Davies, 2008). The subsequent outcome for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) (RAE, 2008) has confirmed the steep decline in research capacity whilst also providing some evidence of pockets of expertise that continue to meet international standards. Nevertheless although in this summary it is possible to provide some accounts of continuing good practice, it will also be evident that producing research of excellent quality is becoming an increasing challenge, at least for most universities in Wales, because of shrinking capacity.

Applied research

Best practice and why effective?

Of the six institutions from Wales which entered the RAE (education sub-panel) only four were judged to reach an internationally excellent (3*) or higher standard, and this was for a small percentage of their submission. Only Bangor University and Swansea Metropolitan University (SMU) submitted research activity that was judged to be 'world leading' (4*). Therefore although work of high quality is occurring in Wales, it is very often being undertaken by isolated individuals or small groups of colleagues who lack the 'critical mass' to readily attract funding that could secure or develop a centre for excellence.

There are, however, in Wales also a number of multi-disciplinary centres and departments engaged in research into education. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Centre for Research on Bilingualism in Theory and Practice at Bangor University (funded initially for five year period from 2007 by ESRC, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG)) is drawing on research from many disciplines including linguistics, neuroscience, psychology as well as education. Although grounded in the bilingual community of north Wales, one of its key aims is to develop collaboration with experts worldwide.

Cardiff University School of Social Sciences (a department that was highly rated, 25% of research activity judged to meet standard for 4*, by the sociology sub-panel of the 2008 RAE) is engaged with education research and undertakes projects on education funded by the ESRC. It has a very strong

research environment which can deliver high quality research. It is also the home of WISERD (Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods) which aims to draw together and build upon the existing expertise in quantitative and qualitative research methods and methodologies at Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff, Glamorgan and Swansea Universities. It has been funded from 2008 by ESRC and HEFCW for a five year period to undertake data integration, primary research and build capacity in the field of social sciences including education and welfare.

Post-statutory education research is a particular area of strength for Cardiff School of Social Sciences. The aim of the ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE), hosted jointly by the Universities of Oxford and Cardiff, is to examine the links between the acquisition and use of skills and knowledge, product market strategies and performance.

The Centre for Child Research, Swansea University also supports research within an inter-disciplinary frame. In the Centre, a core group of researchers with backgrounds in teaching, work alongside colleagues with expertise in, for example, child development, health, social care and children's rights. This approach has enabled them to develop research proposals that span applied, development and evaluation and practitioner research categories.

Weaknesses and strategies in place/being considered?

It is evident that, although there are eleven universities in Wales with education or related departments, applied research, as defined for this summary, is securely located in very few.

In general Welsh universities have a funding shortfall which disadvantages them relative to their other UK counterparts. However Wales has also suffered particularly acutely from the differentiation between research intensive and less research intensive universities that has followed successive RAEs. After the 2001 RAE only one institution (Cardiff) continued to receive quality-related (QR) funding for education research. The 2008 RAE will see a wider spread of very small amounts of funding to the six institutions that entered under education.

As described in the Forum I Stimulus Report for Wales (Daugherty and Davies, 2008) the extension of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme into Wales provided welcome funding and networking support for the isolated clusters of researchers in a number of universities. Details of these projects are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: TLRP Welsh Extension Projects

<i>Institutional lead</i>	<i>Project title</i>
Aberystwyth University (although lead researcher soon after moved to Birmingham University)	Bilingual Literacies for Learning in Further Education
Cardiff University	Learning and working in Further Education in Wales
Swansea Metropolitan University	ICT and InterActive Teaching
Trinity University College, Carmarthen	Prosiect Dysgu Cydradd: Facilitating teacher engagement in more inclusive practice

The Welsh Education Research Network (www.wern.ac.uk) has been funded by ESRC and HEFCW from 2007-9 to develop education research capacity including attracting more income for applied research into Wales. It is a research partnership between the eleven Welsh universities with education or related departments. Using a variety of strategies its aim has been to build collaborative clusters of sustainable research activity between colleagues from different institutions. Fundamental to this approach is a social practices model of capacity building, and therefore an essential criterion for collaborative group funding is the potential for the mix of expertise within the group to build capacity. External evaluation at the end of its first year of operation showed WERN to be effective (Gardner, 2008). More information on WERN can be found in the Wales Stimulus Report for Forum I (Daugherty and Davies, 2008) or in Davies and Salisbury (in press).

Development and evaluation

Best practice and why effective?

The Welsh Assembly Government has made effective use of research and practice reviews to inform policy development. These have been led by distinguished researchers who have examined existing practice within the context of the literature to offer evidence based recommendations. Notable examples are the Daugherty Review of statutory assessment (Daugherty et al., 2004), the two Rees Reviews of student fees (Rees, 2001, 2005) and the Furlong Review of initial teacher training provision (Furlong et al., 2006).

The Welsh Assembly Government is the major funder of development and evaluation research in Wales. As discussed in the stimulus report for Forum 1 (Daugherty and Davies, 2008) much of this work is undertaken by private research consultancies. Table 2 shows, in summary form, examples provided by private research organisations of their own research that they consider to be best practice.

Table 2: Examples of their own work provided by private research organisations

<i>Name of company</i>	<i>Research</i>	<i>Why considered effective</i>
CRG Research Ltd.	Estyn 2010 Consultation Project Consultation with public about future of inspection included targeting hard to reach groups.	Technically challenging to engage with hard to reach groups but achieved by careful engagement with gatekeeper organisations
Miller Research	Development of an online curriculum planning tool for Wiltshire and Swindon LSC. It takes the form of a 16-19 provision audit, linking schools and FE/WBL/ACL data to form a common dataset. Learning partnerships can search a secure online database by a number of variables,	The system has been running for two years and has helped improve understanding of what is delivered where and to whom and has informed partnership building and delivery planning.

Cardiff University School of Social Sciences has been effective at developing dialogue about university research with key stakeholders and when this works well it can result in research

influencing the development of policy and practice. For example Cardiff has been funded by the WAG to carry out research on smoking cessation among young people, and the use of breakfast clubs in Welsh schools.

Post-statutory work has also included survey work, for example the 'Skills Survey 2006', supported by funding from ESRC and others, which was designed to provide government and other agencies with information to guide policy.

As a consequence of working as practitioners prior to joining the HE sector, many of the researchers at less research-intensive universities, are able to bring to development and evaluation projects the benefit of applied knowledge and insight. For example Trinity University College has strong expertise in early years work, particularly from a bilingual perspective and has been instrumental in developing the 'Geiriau Bach' early years practitioners' course to underpin Welsh language development within the Foundation Phase. Similarly there is a research base at Trinity for social inclusion that has staff with high levels of practitioner experience and good knowledge of research skills. This profile, typical of many teaching focused institutions, has produced successful evaluation work (for example, an audit of the Across Wales SEN Disagreement Resolution Service which has informed WAG policy development), as well leading ESRC funded work (for example TLRP 'Prosiect Dysgu Cydradd').

Swansea Metropolitan University (SMU) is developing research centres in Maths and in ICT, these are grounded in teacher education and aim to deliver pedagogical research of high quality.

Local authorities also fund development and evaluation research and the work of Swansea University's Centre for Child Research illustrates the mix of skills (described above) that can produce good research that has high value for practice. As a result the Centre has, from 2006 to the present, undertaken work on early years' curriculum development, with particular focus on the outdoor environment, for a number of local authorities.

Weaknesses and strategies in place/being considered?

WAG is at present developing a research strategy for the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS). The absence of such a strategy has until now hindered planning for education research development in Wales. Many universities, lacking the resources to support bid writing, have found it difficult to respond within the time frames laid down for WAG tenders. DCELLS is currently examining its research procurement channels and has commissioned an external review of these processes with a view to maximising efficiency and capacity building. At the time of writing this report is still to be published.

There is also concern amongst researchers that there is little in the way of a policy forum which could draw more widely on the expertise that exists.

As mentioned above there is dwindling capacity in universities in Wales to provide all types of education research. The Welsh Education Research Network (2007-9) has piloted an inter-institutional collaborative strategy to develop capacity.

Practitioner research and enquiry

Best practice and why effective?

All universities in Wales with education or related departments offer practitioner-led research as part of a Masters degree, most also through professional doctoral studies. Cardiff is also able to offer ESRC and CASE doctoral studentships.

Opportunities for teacher experience of research in Wales have been opened up by the continuing professional development (CPD) awards offered by the General Teaching Council for Wales (GTCW). The programme started in 2001, and in its earlier phases offered Teacher Research Scholarships which were judged over successive independent evaluations to produce work of high quality (Egan and James, 2002; 2003; 2004). The evaluation carried out of the 2003-4 phase noted that although good work had continued that it had started to decline. In subsequent years, the programme has discontinued scholarships and instead offered funding for teachers to undertake an 'action research project'. This is described as a small scale project based on action research which impacts on the teacher's own practice (GTCW, 2009). Ongoing evaluation of the programme is conducted by the school inspectorate in Wales, Estyn. Some observers also believe that opportunities have been missed to integrate the work of teacher-researchers into mainstream academic activity (Elwyn-Jones, 2009).

Nine institutions in Wales offer teacher training at either an initial or postgraduate level. The teaching and research in these institutions is strongly focused on pedagogy, with close partnerships being developed between universities and education providers from early years to post-statutory education and local authorities. As a result academics frequently mentor practitioner action research either via the GTCW programme or as a result of university-based initiatives. For example, Glyndŵr University Wrexham offers research and consultancy services focusing on topics such as action research; developing thinking, reasoning and argument skills in schools; and transitions in education. For Glyndwr collaboration has also extended to other universities (both nationally and internationally) with a view to enhancing practitioner research. These collaborations have enabled university staff, local authority staff and practitioners to work together to enhance reflective thinking and educational practice. Other institutions (Glamorgan, Newport) have developed Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CELTs). These centres aim to develop innovation in teaching and learning by supporting action research amongst their own staff and with other teacher-practitioners. They offer strategies to encourage empirical activity such as internal research funding programmes and in-house journals. Glyndŵr University Wrexham also has its own journal, The Journal of Pedagogical Research and Scholarship, which focuses on developments, innovations and good practice in teaching and learning in compulsory, post-compulsory and higher education contexts.

Examples of collaborative practice have also emerged from local authorities and universities working together. A joint initiative by the City and County of Swansea, Swansea Institute of Higher Education (as it was then, now SMU), Swansea University and teacher leaders from the primary, secondary and FE sectors resulted in the formation of Swansea SER (School Enquiry and Research). This collaboration galvanised support for practitioner research by using a number of methods: a teacher-researcher network, a regular newsletter and occasional conferences. All of the activities were planned and implemented collaboratively and this achieved benefits for knowledge exchange between researchers, policy makers and practitioners. Although its work finished in 2000, Swansea SER is a good example of collaboration across traditional boundaries - it harnessed the expertise of universities, policy makers and practitioners to work together to develop teacher research and reflective practice.

Weaknesses and strategies in place/being considered?

Teacher-researchers in Wales have good opportunities to engage in action research, primarily through the GTCW CPD programme. Chartered Teacher Status is being piloted in Wales to acknowledge and develop professional skills. The taught modules being piloted include improving practice through action research. However at present Wales has decided not to move in the direction of a Masters based teaching profession.

The capacity of professionals in Wales to engage in extended study is limited because of time constraints exacerbated by travelling distances. A solution that is being made increasingly available is to provide courses in modes which make them more accessible to professionals.

Summary and conclusion

Education research in Wales is in decline and is notable for the 'low average quality profiles for Welsh Institutions' (RAE 2008 education sub-panel overview, p.1). With the exception of Cardiff University (which entered the RAE sub-panel for sociology), applied research of high quality is confined to a few isolated individual researchers or small clusters of activity in the other institutions. Good work does still occur, for example the outcomes of the recently concluded TLRP Welsh Extension projects, but it is becoming increasingly beleaguered and starved of funding. Small financial gains will accrue to a wider range of institutions as a consequence of the RAE but this will not be sufficient to sustain a healthy research community. Inter-institutional collaboration may be an answer and this is an approach that is being piloted by WERN. Although it received a successful evaluation at the end of its first year of funding, it is uncertain what support for capacity building will continue after its second year of funding comes to an end in July 2009.

Many universities in Wales have staff who can offer a valuable mix of practitioner experience and scholarship so they should be well placed to respond to the research needs of policy makers. A number of institutions are undertaking development work for the WAG but very few are engaged with research which might contribute to the development of evidence-informed policy. In part this is a consequence of the lack of funding and investment in universities which would provide better research infrastructure to enable them to respond more efficiently to funding calls. Private research consultancies undertake the majority of research work funded by WAG and some examples have been provided of work that they judge to be strong and innovative.

Practitioner research is perhaps in the best state of health. Since 2001, as part of the CPD programme funded by WAG and administered by GTCW, teachers who make a sound application have received funding to undertake action research. In addition many teachers and other education practitioners have developed their expertise by pursuing higher degrees which include an element of research. Universities which provide initial and continuing teacher education have strong links with their surrounding education communities and as a result academic staff are engaged with mentoring and developing practitioner research.

However there are real and grave dangers in Wales that the study of education by prospective teachers and others will become divorced from its research base. Many of the examples of good practice shared in this summary have been successful because they have been based on collaboration – between researchers in Wales with each other, with colleagues in the rest of the UK and beyond; and between researchers and other stakeholders. Wales since devolution has developed exciting and distinctive educational policies. Wales is a small country and its size presents both challenges and opportunities. The education community because it is small can be more intimate and accessible. This helps to open the door to partnership and this brief review would suggest that it

is by working together that home grown capacity for education research can become more sustainable and its impact on teaching and learning more effective.

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