

Although the bursaries had been created to buy time for research activity this did not always reduce the competing demands made by everyday responsibilities. Nevertheless participants still valued the opportunities the bursary group presented:

Training usually carries with it some time for the activity whereas 'learning on the job' can put great constraints on the time available as workload does not decrease to allow for the learning... However the learning advantages of working on a 'real' research bid with experienced colleagues and an inspiring mentor cannot be replicated by a training environment. In the model adopted new learning was used and put into practice immediately rather than, as can be the case with new training, new skills are not practiced and have to wait until an opportunity for use presents itself. [Second career researcher]

For the most part there was willingness in the institutions to make this time available. Nevertheless, sometimes the practicalities, for example a lack of ease of access to available cover staff, resulted in difficulties. This was most generally the case in institutions which are not research focused, and it highlighted the need for cultural and infrastructural change in some institutions. It can be said that for growth in capacity to be sustained, institutional development must go hand in hand with the upskilling that is occurring amongst individual researchers at that institution.

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Bursary group activity has led to some substantive outputs – one group's proposal has been successful in attracting funding, all groups have funding proposals that have been submitted or are underway with plans for submission before Christmas. Papers have been presented at the annual conferences of BERA, the Scottish Education Research Association (SERA), the European Conference on Education Research (ECER), Inquiring Pedagogies (IPED), and the International Study of Religion in Central and Eastern Europe Association (ISORECEA) and more are planned. One group has held a seminar event to build new networks between stakeholders.

A very important aspect of the WERN initiative is the spirit of collaboration between institutions and this has begun the process of building a community of education research in Wales. Crucial to these developments been the democratic and inclusive method of governance, with all institutions having an equal voice in deciding WERN's scope and direction.

This community spirit was evident at the Colloquium which concluded WERN's first year. The aim of the event was to showcase recent developments in capacity building in Wales. The four recently concluded TLRP Welsh extension projects delivered papers and Andrew Pollard, Director of the TLRP, shared his thoughts on WERN's development; all of the bursary groups presented posters and/or made formal presentations; and AERS coordinator Steve Baron widened horizons by describing links between the Scottish and Welsh experiences of capacity building.

The majority of delegates rated the event very positively; they commented on the lively atmosphere and the feeling of a research community that was growing as a result of WERN activity. One delegate commented:

Today has been really important and has made visible some powerful projects and highlighted huge potential for more joined up working across Wales... the buzz and excitement in the first coffee break and at lunch was tangible. The less experienced researchers have had a great apprenticeship experience here today and there has been nothing peripheral about their participation they quite rightly have been centre stage! [Experienced researcher]

It has not been possible to describe fully the range of WERN activities (refer to Davies and Salisbury (in press)) or discuss its inter-institutional impact (see Davies and Salisbury, 2008). However the report of the external evaluator concluded:

WERN was never formulated as a transforming 'silver bullet' initiative [but]... 'in terms of its primary intention 'to trial a funding and support structure for education researchers in Wales that harnesses collaboration between institutions to build research capacity'... the WERN initiative has been highly successful [Gardner, 2008: 4-5]

The pilot year has created some excitement around research in new places, and has produced a momentum for change that uses fresh-collaborative- ways of working. After suffering a long period of decline WERN's short period of funding can only be a small start to rebuilding capacity. Extension funding from HEFCW and ESRC has now been made available until July 2009 and so WERN will be able, as well as continuing with the Group Bursary Scheme, to introduce additional collaborative funding opportunities for this period. However, although further incremental progress is expected over the coming year, it will require a coherent long term strategy, with the commitment of all relevant stakeholders, coupled with further investment to embed a sustainable community of collaborative research in Wales.

References

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