

Collaboration Builds Capacity In Wales

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The Welsh Education Research Network (WERN), funded by ESRC and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), has had a successful first year- and can now look forward to funding for at least another year.



Bursary Group for Working Lives (top): Narratives of occupational change in FE and HE in post-devolution Wales (l to r: Caryn Cook (Newport), Brychan Thomas (Glamorgan), Lyn Daunton (Glamorgan), Lynne Gornall (Glamorgan), Iheanyi Igbuta (Glamorgan) and Jane Salisbury (Cardiff))

Above: The bursary group at work

In 2007 all the Welsh HEIs with education and education-related departments formed a collaborative partnership to share research skills and expertise. Education research capacity in Welsh universities,

with the exception of Cardiff University, has been in steady decline since the beginning of the 1990s. Many departments have very few research active staff and so researchers are isolated and lack opportunities to 'learn alongside' more experienced peers.

Following a social practices model of learning (see Davies and Salisbury, 2008, for more information on this rationale) WERN used the funding it received to build collaboration between researchers from different institutions—joint training events, a research colloquium and, the main focus, the Group Bursary Scheme. The Bursary Scheme provided funding to groups of colleagues to work together to prepare a proposal to submit to a research funding organisation. An essential criterion for WERN funding was that there needed to be a sufficient mix of expertise and experience within the group to have the potential to build the capacity of group members. Each group had also to find a mentor – a skilled and respected researcher in the appropriate field – who would meet with the group on an occasional basis to offer advice and support.

WERN's funding for this pilot phase was only nine months and therefore time frames were of necessity

very short, nevertheless 24 applications for bursaries were received, most with high levels of inter-institutional collaboration. Although only eight could be funded the successful groups included members from nine institutions, had varied levels of experience and had a range of focus that extended from the new Welsh Foundation Phase to recording the working lives of staff in post 16 education.

Both the internal (Davies, 2008) and external evaluation (Gardner, 2008) of WERN found that the group members perceived the informal learning opportunities presented by the Bursary Scheme to be an effective way to develop new research skills:

The project opened up the opportunity to work with colleagues from another institution and learn from their experience and expertise. One especially notable feature was the building of sufficient trust and respect between members that there was a willingness to share skills and expertise unreservedly between partners from different institutions. I would say that the building of trust and research cooperation between institutions was a key success of the WERN project [Experienced researcher]

Working in this way has also been successful in increasing the confidence of group members about their abilities and the overwhelming majority have reported their research skills have improved (see Davies and Salisbury (in press) for a full account of this evaluation). The opportunity to work alongside more experienced colleagues was perceived as a valuable and supportive environment in which to undertake a new, and sometimes daunting, role. It created space for reflection and intellectual challenge and began to build new collaborative alliances that have potential for the future. Frustrations did arise from different levels of experience, communication across institutions and sometimes just geographical distance.