



## **SFRE Forum I**

## **Stimulus Report: Wales**

***October 2008***



# **Capacity and Quality in Education Research in Wales**

## **A Stimulus Report for SFRE Forum I**

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## Contents

A	Preface and acknowledgements	7
B	Executive summary	9
C	Main report	11
	1.0 Introduction	11
	1.1 The Welsh context	12
	1.2 The evidence base for the report	15
	2.0 The context of education research in Wales	15
	2.1 Provision	18
	2.2 Outstanding issues	19
	3.0 Quality and accountability for education research in Wales	19
	3.1 Provision	21
	3.2 Outstanding issues	23
	4.0 Capacity building for education research in Wales	23
	4.1 Provision	25
	4.2 Outstanding issues	27
	5.0 Conclusion	29
D	Bibliography	31
E	Glossary of Acronyms	



## **A. Preface and acknowledgements**

While the authors take full responsibility for the report's Contents we are grateful to the colleagues who have helped us both by providing us with evidence that we have drawn upon and by commenting on earlier drafts. It would not have been possible to report even as incompletely as we have done on the current state of education research in Wales without the assistance received from Alison Rees, Arwel Thomas, Joanne Starkey, Celia Hunt, Chris Owen and Robert Smith. We are also indebted to the colleagues who offered us detailed and constructive feedback on the first draft: Chris Owen, Celia Hunt, Gareth Rees, John Furlong and Gareth Elwyn Jones.

The report that follows remains a partial (in both senses) account of the current state of education research but our hope is that it can contribute to strengthening the role of research in an exciting but challenging phase in the evolution of educational provision in Wales.





## B. Executive summary

Wales has a distinctive historical, socio-economic, cultural and linguistic identity. Since devolution the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has developed a wide range of education policies that are creating an education system that is divergent in several ways from its English counterpart, and which place Wales at a different stage in policy development from that to be found in other parts of the UK.

Education research in Wales has seen an overall decline in capacity and a concentration in fewer institutions; only Cardiff, graded as 5\* in the 2001 RAE, receives core research funding. Nevertheless a number of research centres have been established since 2001, and there are pockets of research specialism in every HEI, although the current map of funded education research continues to be dominated by Cardiff University. Practitioner research has been fostered by the General Teaching Council for Wales (GTCW) as part of a Continuing Professional Development Programme, funded by WAG.

The WAG is undoubtedly the biggest commissioner and user of educational research in Wales. Based on information provided for this report, the majority of funded projects are evaluations of aspects of the education programmes under development by Department of Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS); many of these are relatively small and focused on specific policy priorities although there are several notable exceptions. Analysis of the organisations and individuals commissioned to undertake this work shows that the successful bidders were mainly private sector consultancies.

Accountability for research in the HE sector has been largely been through successive Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs) and the Funding Council decisions based on those RAEs. Quality and accountability in relation to use of research must focus mainly on research commissioned by WAG; DCELLS officials who make these judgements operate, as do their counterparts elsewhere in the UK, within the general norms of the Government research service. The outputs of research commissioned by DCELLS are open to public scrutiny on WAG websites.

Three recent initiatives have significance for capacity building in Wales. In 2004 the UK Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) facilitated four extension projects in Wales. Based at Welsh institutions, they provided opportunities for capacity building by collaboration between researchers in Wales, and across the UK. Secondly, the Welsh Education Research Network is a collaborative research partnership between all HEIs in Wales with education departments; in June 2008 it completed a successful first pilot year and funding by HEFCW and ESRC has been continued into a second year. Thirdly, from 2009 the WAG intends to commit funding of an annual £0.5 million for three years to enhance the level of applied educational research that is available to policy makers at DCELLS.

The main conclusions to be drawn from this report are that education research in Wales is clearly not healthy, and compares unfavourably with the other three countries of the UK. The goals of recent capacity building initiatives now need to be embodied in a broader strategy, with commitments from all the main stakeholders to play their part in building education research capacity in Wales.



## C. Main Report

### 1. Introduction

#### *The Welsh context*

The context for education research in Wales is a consequence of the country's history and of its distinctive cultural and linguistic traditions. The legacy of industrialisation has produced a class structure very different from either England or Scotland and has also impacted on the Welsh economic structure. A long period of intellectual soul searching about Welsh identity, evident in the drive for Welsh-medium education in the years following the Second World War and accentuated by the Welsh nationalist protests in the 1950s and 60s, had by the 1990s arrived at a mainstream consensus that Wales is a country with a unique historical, cultural and linguistic identity. Equal status for the Welsh and English languages is generally supported (the 2001 Census reported 20.8% of the population as being able to speak Welsh) and there has been a growing recognition that Wales has particular needs that require distinctive policy solutions. Inclusion of the Welsh language as a national curriculum school subject in 1988 and subsequent modification of the national curriculum to emphasise elements of Welsh culture, the 'Curriculum Cymreig', are symptomatic of this perspective (Jones and Roderick, 2003).

The forty years prior to the narrow vote in 1997 to establish a devolved Assembly had seen some gradual administrative devolution. In the 1970s and 80s the Welsh Office assumed powers for education and was able to interpret Westminster policies on education for Wales by making minor modifications. In the 1990s several new quangos, such as the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority (known by its Welsh acronym, ACCAC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), adapted UK policy initiatives for the Welsh context. However, it was the establishment of a democratically elected and accountable Assembly that would prove to be the most significant step forward in the creation of a distinctive policy environment (Rees, 2007). Since 2006 a fundamental restructuring of responsibilities for developing and implementing education policy has seen several former 'arm's length' non-departmental public bodies merged into an expanded department of Government, now the Department of Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS). The most important of the merged organisations in terms of education research was Education and Learning Wales (ELWa), responsible for post-16 education and training.

Although the education system in England and Wales was often spoken of in one breath Welsh education has always retained something of its own flavour. For example, the commitment to non-selective comprehensive education has been maintained (Phillips, 2003) and the role of local authorities has continued to be significant (Jones, 2002). What is now referred to as the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has from the outset made explicit its intention to develop policies that respond to Welsh needs. 'The Learning Country' (National Assembly

for Wales, 2001), which laid out the Assembly's strategic vision for education, states:

'We share strategic goals with our colleagues in England-but we often need to take a different route to achieve them. We shall take our own policy direction where necessary to get the best for Wales' (p.2).

Social policy in this new era has been shaped by Wales's distinctive social and economic history (Drakeford, 2007). Drakeford claims (p.4) that 'Wales is the only part of the United Kingdom to have a genuinely long-term commitment to left of centre redistributive politics, stretching for more than 150 years from 19th century Liberalism through 20th century Labourism to the present day'. He argues for six 'policy principles', grounded in the legacy of industrialisation in Wales, to underpin specific initiatives in social policy, including education. These include co-operation rather than competition, high trust in the relationship between the citizen and the state (with the abolition of school league tables as an example of this), and a more equal society as an overarching policy goal rather than the more conventional pursuit of equality of opportunity.

The Welsh Assembly Government is now in its third term, with a Labour/Plaid Cymru coalition<sup>1</sup> replacing the previous Labour-led administrations. The intention to 'take our own policy direction' has become manifest in policies that are creating a Welsh education system divergent in several ways from its English counterpart. The experiential and play orientated Foundation Phase is set to re-shape education from three to seven years (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2007). In upper secondary and post-compulsory education the 14 to 19 Learning Pathways programme (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006) has established a policy framework within which a new curriculum and qualification, 'The Welsh Baccalaureate', is being rolled out (Hayden and Thompson, 2007). And in the middle years of schooling, following the Daugherty Review (Daugherty, 2004), statutory tests have been phased out and moderated teacher assessments are being developed as the main source for evaluating pupil progress. This wide-ranging set of policy initiatives places Wales at a different stage in policy development from that to be found in either England or Scotland, an important consideration when discussing the demand for, and use of, evidence from research.

### ***The evidence base for the report***

The evidence base for this report is acknowledged to be uneven and incomplete. The best documented area is the research undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs). Individual HEIs routinely place information about research in the public domain, a significant proportion of project funding is drawn from Government-funded Research Councils and both the quality of HEI research output and the criteria used to judge that output are made explicit by the periodic Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Even within higher education, however, more time and resources would be needed to report accurately on research into education that is not classified, by the HEIs themselves or by the RAE, under 'education'.

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<sup>1</sup> Policy development is taking place within the terms of the agreement reached between the two parties in June 2007: *One Wales: A progressive agenda for the government of Wales*.

For other equally important parts of the picture of education research we have relied on a combination of limited internet searches and information supplied by colleagues in several organisations, notably HEFCW and DCELLS. This has enabled us to report on some aspects of capacity but with several significant gaps. These include the research commissioned by local education authorities and the surveys undertaken by the education inspectorate, Estyn. Some of our sources, for example on practitioner research, also cover only the schools sector. For the quality dimension of the report there is no source outside higher education comparable to the RAE and our conclusions in relation to research not undertaken by HEIs are therefore more speculative. For example, we acknowledge that the information available to us about the private sector agencies on which DCELLS relies for most of its commissioned research is sketchy.



## 2. The context of education research in Wales

### 2.1. Provision

Furlong and White's 2001 report on Educational Research Capacity in Wales provides us with a baseline for an account of educational research in Wales in 2008. It also offers a framework for reviewing the current context, in terms of capacity both for undertaking and for using research.

Research undertaken in higher education institutions (HEIs) is more fully documented than education research by public agencies and by the private sector, though an up-to-date picture of research activity in HEIs will not emerge until the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has reported.

Rees and Power (2007) have summarised the main trends, including an overall decline in capacity and a concentration in fewer institutions. More than half of the 77 research-active staff returned in Wales for the 2001 RAE were located in two institutions, Cardiff University and Swansea University, but the latter no longer receives core ('QR') funding for education research from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). Only Cardiff, graded as 5\* in the 2001 RAE and with a QR income of just over £1m in 2006/07, now receives core funding for education research.

The weakness of HEI education research in Wales is also strikingly illustrated by the continuing low level of research grant income per member of 'research active' HEI staff in Wales when compared with the other three countries of the UK (Rees & Power, p.94) and the trends are not encouraging. For example, the education research grant and contract income of one institution, Aberystwyth University, declined from £785,000 in 2000/01 to £3,000 in 2005/06. Indeed the total grant and contract income for education research in the HEIs other than Cardiff University amounted to only £625,000 in 2005/06. The level of applications to the UK Research Councils has been disappointingly low.

While its weakness is all too obvious it is not easy to characterise the nature of education research undertaken by HEIs in Wales. Furlong & White's analysis of funded research projects in Welsh HEI departments of education over the period 1998-2000 showed more than three quarters of the funding received being for projects studying either the organisation of education institutions or the curriculum. A more fine-grained, but now dated, picture is identifiable from the research groups reported by the HEIs in their submissions to the 2001 RAE<sup>2</sup>. Several research centres have been established since 2001, for example the multi-disciplinary, ESRC-funded Centre for Research on Bilingualism at Bangor University and the Centre for Child Research at Swansea. There are also pockets of research specialism in every HEI, including those that have never received HEFCW core funding for research. It is in order to link and support these pockets of activity that the Welsh Education Research Network (WERN) initiative was established in 2007 (see section 4).

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/submissions> accessed 8<sup>th</sup> May 2008

However, the current map of funded education research in HEIs in Wales continues to be dominated by Cardiff University. Education research at Cardiff School of Social Sciences focuses on studies of education and the ‘knowledge economy’, developing sociological approaches to the analysis of the relationships between education and training systems and the labour market. Though Cardiff has also received substantial grant funding for research in the schools sector, for example on school choice and on health education, most of its funded research has been into post-compulsory education. That work has ranged across skills development, workplace learning and several projects on further and higher education, funded both by ESRC and by WAG in support of Assembly Government policy initiatives such as the Future Skills Wales project. ESRC’s funding, for five years from 2008, of a Research Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance is further evidence of Cardiff’s strengths in this area of research.

The Welsh Unit of the National Foundation for Education Research based in Swansea is part of a not-for-profit organisation, based in Slough, England. NFER Cymru undertakes a wide range of education research projects (24 were listed on its website in May 2008<sup>3</sup>) most of them commissioned either by the Welsh Assembly Government or by individual local education authorities and mainly focussing on evaluating policy initiatives.

Research undertaken by practitioners in the schools sector has for several years been fostered by the General Teaching Council for Wales (GTCW) as part of a Continuing Professional Development programme<sup>4</sup>, funded by WAG. Action research is one of five categories of professional activity under which teachers can apply for grants, in this case with awards up to a maximum of £2,500. The whole GTCW Continuing Professional Development programme, including the practitioner research element, has been the subject of a series of reports by the education inspectorate, Estyn<sup>5</sup>.

When we turn from undertaking education research to using the outcomes from it, Furlong & White (2001, 12) analysed their evidence in relation to use at different stages in the policy cycle – planning, development and evaluation. One of their recommendations was that ‘The National Assembly for Wales should consider taking the lead [in this], demonstrating a clear commitment to the increased role of research in all phases of policy development and evaluation’ (p.5). The Learning Country: Vision into Action (2007) restates the Assembly Government’s commitment to the evidence base for policy with a commentary on ‘what does our analysis and research tell us’ in each policy area. However, while there has been a genuine commitment from the Welsh Assembly Government to ‘evidence-informed policy’ and numerous examples of Government actively engaging with research and researchers there are also ‘areas of policy where the influence of evidence, however defined, on policy is not obvious’ (Daugherty, 2007, 6).

Although there are other organisations commissioning and using education research, such as the Institute of Welsh Affairs and individual LEAs, it is the Welsh Assembly

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/about-nfer/departments/welsh-office.cfm> accessed 8<sup>th</sup> May 2008

<sup>4</sup> Further information at [www.gtcw.org.uk](http://www.gtcw.org.uk)

<sup>5</sup> The most recent Estyn report on this programme was published in September 2007 and is available at [www.estyn.gov.uk](http://www.estyn.gov.uk)



Government that is undoubtedly the biggest commissioner and user of such research within Wales. It is in the information obtained from the WAG when preparing this report that two notable features of the current context for education research in Wales become apparent. First, there is a wide range of organisations from which research is being commissioned by the WAG. Second, 'parliamentary devolution since 1999 and the consequent restructuring of the state in Wales provide[s] ... an especially clear demonstration of the symbiotic relationship which educational research now has with the state' (Rees and Power, 2007, 97).

Our information on the research commissioned by WAG is based on lists of funded projects for the years 2006/7 and 2007/8 supplied by DCELLS officials in response to requests for a fuller disclosure of information (the information is not routinely in the public domain). In 2006/7 contracts to the value of just over £1.5m were awarded plus three further three-year contracts listed as worth up to a total of £4.4m.. In 2007/8 contracts worth a total of just over £2m were awarded. In addition six projects totalling £113,000 were awarded by the DCELLS Director's office in 2007/8, focussing on informing strategy in key areas of policy.

A majority of the WAG funded projects are evaluations of aspects of the many education programmes under development by DCELLS. The remainder are targeted at improving the evidence base for policy decisions, for example by investigating student perceptions of the options available to them in relation to the '14 to 19 Learning Pathways' policy. Many are relatively small scale and narrowly focused on specific priorities but there are several notable exceptions. High profile projects include an evaluation of the Basic Skills Strategy (£600k) and an evaluation of the 'Cymorth' and 'Flying Start' programmes (up to £2.7m over three years).

A preliminary analysis of the organisations and individuals commissioned by WAG to undertake the work shows that the successful bidders were mainly private sector consultancies. Approximately thirty such consultancies - some of them based in Wales, others London-based - were among the organisations awarded contracts during that two year period. The exceptions to that generalisation included the NFER (seven contracts to a total value of c £133,000) and three HEIs in England that were awarded contracts totalling £78,000). No HEI in Wales figures in the list for either year. The six strategic projects commissioned by the Director of DCELLS were all undertaken by individual consultants, two from HEIs in Wales, one from England and two from Australia.

On the question of the Government's role in education research, it is significant that a search of the Assembly Government's website reveals strategies and associated infrastructure in relation to economic research and social research but not in education. For example the WAG's Economic Research Advisory Panel's remit includes not only giving advice to Government but also to 'advise on how best to develop the capacity and expertise of Wales-based institutions to contribute to the research agenda'. DCELLS strategy for research is currently expressed in the form of an annually updated Departmental Evidence Plan, the current version of which covers the years 2007-10.

The context for education research as summarised above has, however, recently shifted significantly as a consequence of three initiatives taken by national (Welsh and UK) agencies:

- The extension projects that were part of the UK Teaching and Learning Research Programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).
- The Welsh Education Research Network funded by ESRC and HEFCW.
- The proposed Applied Education Research in Wales (AERW) programme to be funded by the Welsh Assembly Government.
- These capacity building initiatives are discussed below in section 4 of this report.

## **2.2. Outstanding issues**

Three issues emerge from this review of the current context:

- The limited capacity of education research in the higher education sector, in terms of both basic and policy-related research. It is too soon to judge the impact of recent attempts to develop research capacity but, as of 2008, all the relevant indicators show a low level of HEI education research capacity in Wales outside Cardiff University.
- The lack of an infrastructure to support those with an interest in fostering indigenous research capacity. In higher education, there has until recently been no Wales-wide organisation of education researchers and the only indigenous academic journal, The Welsh Journal of Education, faced an uncertain future. In Government, there has been no equivalent in education to the Economic Research Advisory Panel.
- The growing strength and diversity of private sector research activity. There were some thirty different organisations awarded contracts by DCELLS in 2006/7 and 2007/8. Arad Consulting, based in Cardiff and with seven projects to a total value of nearly £1/2m., is one example of the new face of policy-related research in Wales.
- The absence of explicit strategies for developing education research, either within Government or within the higher education sector. The warnings spelled out in Furlong and White's 2001 report on research capacity seem for the most part not to have been heeded.

### 3. Quality and accountability for education research in Wales

#### 3.1. Provision

Accountability for research in the HE sector can be considered, as elsewhere in the UK, in terms of the individual researcher, of system-wide procedures and of the HE institution.

Recognition of the individual researcher typically depends on her/his research being acknowledged through peer-reviewed publication and through success in applications for research grants. That process has been codified in a particular way by the UK-wide system of subject-based judgment of the quality of the research activity of institutions through successive Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs) and Funding Council decisions based on those RAEs. For example, the 2001 RAE showed that education research in Wales at that time, though small in scale and with few outstanding features, had three HEIs (Aberystwyth, Bangor and Swansea) with research in education judged as being as of national excellence in over two-thirds of research activity with some evidence of international excellence (the benchmark for a 3a grading). If the long term threshold for core funding by the Funding Council had been set at that level, as it was for two years in Wales after such funding was discontinued in England, Wales would have had a relatively small and weak, but diverse and geographically dispersed, provision of core-funded education research in HEIs.

It is arguable that such an outcome would have been beneficial for maintaining the significant contribution education research has made to the research undertaken by HEIs in Wales into the language, history and society of Wales<sup>6</sup>. Richard Wyn Jones, commenting on the view of some researchers that Wales-focused work couldn't, by definition, be classified as being of 'international' quality no matter how good it is, has recently argued for an amendment to the RAE criteria to ensure that subject panels 'recognise and reward work that makes a contribution to civil society' (Jones, 2008, 11). As Furlong and Oancea have argued in a wider context, 'the interpretation of both 'quality' and 'relevance' in public assessments of research ...generated in many circles increased concerns about the treatment of certain types of research' (2006, 120).

In Wales, however, to maintain QR funding for three education departments graded at no higher than 3a in the 2001 RAE would also have had the effect of sustaining an inadequate education research infrastructure in the HEI sector. In the event, since 2004/5 only Cardiff University has received QR funding, at about £1m each year, for education research. And the three national initiatives discussed in the next section have, in different ways, sought to address the now more widely acknowledged infrastructural weaknesses.

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard Wyn Jones (2004), *The Failure of the Universities of Wales*, Cardiff: IWA for evidence about education as the discipline that, apart from Welsh Language and Literature, contributed most in the 2001 to the academic study of Welsh society.

Considering the accountability of individual HE institutions for the research undertaken by their staff adds another dimension to a discussion of capacity that has been dominated by the RAE and its impact. The differing responses of Welsh HEIs to the absence of core funding from HEFCW reveals a more complex picture, with steep decline in education research in some institutions and modest growth in others. Aberystwyth has withdrawn institutional support from education research, Bangor has continued to support a small cadre of education researchers within a larger school of education and Swansea University has transferred most of its education staff to its neighbour Swansea Metropolitan University (SMU). Other HEIs that have never received core funding for education research, including SMU, University of Glamorgan, University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC) and Trinity College Carmarthen, have been taking modest steps to build their research capacity.

It remains to be seen whether those steps will turn out to be the early signs of a recovery for education research in Wales in HEIs other than Cardiff University. Much will depend on the outcome of the restructuring of HEI-based initial teacher training (ITT), currently being negotiated between HEFCW and the affected HEIs, into three regional schools of education in North and Central, South West and South East Wales. Furlong, the author of a 2006 review of ITT in Wales (Furlong et.al., 2006) from which the original proposal for regional schools of education emerged, had wanted to include education research as part of the review's remit. He argues that a scholarly culture in HE is the backbone of a research culture in that sector; a strategic approach should therefore plan ITT provision alongside the other activities to which it is organisationally linked in HEIs – teaching at higher degree level and education research (Furlong et.al. 2007). It became clear, however, that WAG officials, supported by Ministers, preferred to focus more narrowly on the policy priority of scaling down the output of HEI-trained schoolteachers.

This decoupling of policy on the training of teachers from policy on education research is made explicit in the WAG response to HEFCW about ITT reconfiguration in July 2007, the most recent indication of Government thinking on this matter: 'we think that any initiative on changes in education research capacity will need to take place outside the scope of the ITT Change Plan'. In the next sentence in that letter WAG indicates it will contact HEFCW separately once options for how changes in education research capacity might be taken forward have been considered. The Applied Education Research Wales initiative in 2008 (para 4.9) is the only formal indication to date of a WAG policy for building education research capacity in Wales.

Turning to organisations outside higher education that undertake education research in Wales, the quality and accountability dimensions of such research are, with one exception, more difficult to identify. That exception is the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER). About 60% of its income is from contracted research and in that respect it is in direct competition with private sector research providers, with success in the market for contracts as the ultimate index of quality. But the Foundation also positions itself as contributing to the education research community more generally, both nationally (in England, Wales and, more recently, Northern Ireland) and internationally. In that sense it expects some of its research output, for example articles in academic journals, to be judged by criteria similar to those applied to HEI-based research.

Questions of quality and accountability in relation to the use of education research in Wales must focus mainly on the research commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government and, on a much smaller scale, by other public bodies. Significant changes have occurred in WAG's approach to education research since the 2006 organisational changes (para 1.2). A research and evaluation team has been established within DCELLS to work with the Department's policy teams to ensure that research outputs are matched to policy requirements. As elsewhere in the UK the commissioning of research is subject to public sector procurement rules.

The criteria used to judge research quality, and the way those criteria are employed to judge quality, are not as open to scrutiny as their equivalents in higher education. However, the DCELLS officials who make those judgments operate, as do their counterparts elsewhere in the UK, within the general norms of the Government social research service. The lines of accountability for the research commissioned by DCELLS are presumably the same as for any work for which officials in government departments are responsible – managerial within the organisation and political in the sense that overall responsibility rests with political decision-makers. In relation to the latter, it would appear that education research has not surfaced as a priority for the Assembly's politicians since Furlong presented his report on capacity building to its education committee in 2002.

The outputs of the research commissioned by DCELLS are, however, as open to public scrutiny as are the outputs of the research undertaken in HEIs. There are currently 50 evaluation reports and over 40 other research reports on the Welsh Assembly Government's website<sup>7</sup>. Outputs from the Future Skills Wales programme are available on the Learning Observatory website<sup>8</sup>.

### 3.2. Outstanding issues

Four issues emerge from this consideration of quality and accountability:

- The link between HEI education research, teaching at higher degree level and the professional development of teachers in schools and colleges. In a context across the UK where funded education research is increasingly concentrated in fewer HEIs what future is there for the historic association of education research in HEIs with the pre- and in-service education of teachers and the academic study of education?
- The indigenous research base and research into civil society. In an increasingly global context for education research should a special case be made for sustaining an indigenous research capacity and for supporting research that focuses on the role of education in Welsh civil society?

<sup>7</sup> <http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/research-and-evaluation/?lang=en>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.learningobservatory.com/about-us/>

- The accountability of Government in its role as research user. In what ways should Government be held accountable for the quality of the research that it commissions, manages and draws on to inform policy decisions?
- The role of Government in relation to the development of research capacity. Should the Welsh Assembly Government leave it to its agencies, such as HEFCW, to allocate funds according to RAE-driven judgments of quality or should it take a more active role in supporting and sustaining indigenous research capacity?

## 4. Capacity building for education research in Wales

### 4.1. Provision

The decline in educational research in Wales, evident for many years, can be traced through successive RAEs (Rees and Power, 2007). Efforts to reverse this trend, based on collaboration between institutions, have floundered in the past because of lack of resources or cooperation. Limited attempts to modify the impact of the UK RAE gradings on the funding of research in Welsh HEIs have not been sustained.

However, in 2004, the UK Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) facilitated ‘extension project funding’ within Wales.. £0.5 million over three years was jointly provided by the Welsh Assembly Government and the ESRC to fund between four and six research projects. An explicit goal of the funding was the enhancement of capacity in Wales to conduct high quality research (ESRC, 2004). The call for bids that went out to all Welsh HEIs specified that proposed projects should extend or follow-up the research that had been undertaken in earlier TLRP phases, but that new awards should be based at a Welsh institution. The intention of these specifications was to develop productive synergies between TLRP projects, and also provide opportunities for capacity building by collaboration between researchers in Wales, and across the UK (Pollard, 2008).

The four proposals that were selected for funding were spread across age phases (primary to FE), education foci with high relevance to the policy context in Wales (bilingual literacy, inclusion, ICT, and FE learning and working practices) and institutions in Wales (led by academics from Aberystwyth<sup>9</sup>, Swansea Institute later Swansea Metropolitan University, Trinity College Carmarthen and Cardiff University). All the projects have since been successfully completed. The impact of the TLRP in Wales, including capacity building, has not been formally evaluated. Informal enquiries for this report, undertaken with researchers from each project, found that they felt they had benefited particularly from the networking opportunities provided by being part of the TLRP. Engagement with UK-wide TLRP activities such as conferences, meetings, co-working on TLRP outputs was valued. The shared participation in TLRP also created a contact network between Welsh projects, which would contribute to the beginnings of the second recent capacity building initiative in Wales, the Welsh Education Research Network (WERN).

WERN originated in an informal, mutual support network between active, but often isolated, researchers in Welsh HEIs. Its existence was formalised in October 2007 when joint funding from the ESRC and HEFCW of £150,000 was made available to fund a nine month pilot capacity building network. WAG interest in the network was shown by the participation of a DCELLS official in the WERN Advisory Group. The availability of ESRC funding was a consequence of a decision by the ESRC Training and Development Board to pilot strategies of inter-institutional collaboration that could build UK educational research capacity.

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<sup>9</sup> The lead researcher from the Aberystwyth project moved to a new post at Birmingham University soon after the project started although the research work continued to be conducted in Wales.

The aim of the Network is to develop educational research capacity, by building a collaborative partnership to share expertise across all the higher education institutions in Wales with education and related departments. All the HEIs have been actively involved: Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Cardiff University, Glyndr University (formerly NEWI), The Open University in Wales, Swansea Metropolitan University (formerly SIHE), Swansea University, Trinity College Carmarthen, University of Glamorgan, University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC) and University of Wales Newport. The leadership of WERN is distributed and democratic involving all partner institutions.

The principal method for achieving the Network's aims has been the provision of bursaries to support inter-institutional collaboration to develop and produce proposals to funding organisations. Awareness of the lack of time available for research activity, particularly in less research intensive institutions, was an important driver for providing this funding which could be used in part to 'buy out' staff time. An essential criterion for receipt of WERN bursary funding was a mix of skills and experience within the group that would have the potential to provide opportunities for informal workplace learning between members.

An external evaluation of WERN by Professor John Gardner (Queen's University, Belfast) has provided evidence of a high level of institutional participation and collaboration in bursary activity. For example, institutions contributed to an average of six bursary group applications and were involved with an average of five collaborating institutions overall (Gardner, 2008). All groups have achieved tangible outputs and have bid proposals under development, with one bid already being successful. Additionally, conference abstracts have been submitted, journal articles are in preparation and a studentship application has been made. Time to engage in bursary activity has been identified as the major difficulty for participants despite funding being made available (ibid). Although this is a consequence in some cases of factors outside institutional control such as availability of suitable cover staff for some subject specialisms, in other instances it indicates that some institutions still need to place greater value and priority on supporting staff who engage in research.

The external evaluation acknowledges that 'WERN was never formulated as a transforming 'silver bullet' initiative' but considers '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 p.3-4). We can conclude from this evaluation that a good start has been made on establishing a culture of research collaboration between Welsh HEIs. In order to continue to build upon this progress WERN has recently been granted extension funding of £200,000 by HEFCW and ESRC for a further year until July 2009.

A third recent initiative with implications for capacity is the Applied Education Research in Wales (AERW) programme that is being funded by the Welsh Assembly Government. The funding of an annual £0.5 million for three years, to be matched by funding from HEIs, is to enhance the level of applied educational research available to policy makers at the Department of Culture, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS). A stimulus for this initiative has been the launch of



an educational effectiveness strategy in Wales, and the research undertaken is expected to advise DCELLS on how to raise learner outcomes through improved delivery of effective teaching. However, the Welsh Assembly Government also made clear in the project specification that it expects the new research capacity that is created to retain and build upon the collaborative ethos that has begun to develop (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008).

In February 2008 all HEIs in Wales were invited to bid, and three applications were received, two from individual institutions, Cardiff University and UWIC, and a third from WERN which was supported by all Welsh HEIs. UWIC was selected as the preferred bidder but after a period of further negotiation a decision was made not to proceed to award the grant to this bid. DCELLS has now decided to undertake an internal review of its research needs and anticipates that a fresh project specification will be published towards the end of 2008 with view to the programme being in place by mid 2009.

#### **4.2. Outstanding Issues**

Three issues emerge from this review of capacity building initiatives:

- The need for strategic thinking about capacity. Key stakeholders have recently provided funding which is supporting some modest re-growth in capacity. However, there is as yet no coherent strategy for developing and maintaining educational research in Wales in the medium to long term. What form might such a strategy take and how might it be developed?
- The need to link different initiatives. At present there are two initiatives that have importance for capacity building, WERN that is at present being funded until 2009 and AERW which it is anticipated will be funded from 2009 to 2012. It is important that the aims of the funding bodies for these initiatives, and the projected use of the funds, have a consistent approach to capacity building
- The need to sustain inter-institutional collaboration. Collaborative research relationships are starting to develop well between Welsh institutions. However, in some institutions there are still issues of insufficient support available to staff undertaking educational research.



## 5. Conclusion

From the evidence reviewed for this report it might appear that education research is being carried out in two parallel worlds with minimal crossover between them. One world comprises the academics in HEI schools of education who are engaged in research in their specialist fields; that research is peer-reviewed in academic publications with priorities dominated by the periodic Research Assessment Exercise. In a parallel world, working to different priorities and timescales, is the research undertaken in response to the policy-driven needs of the Welsh Assembly Government; that research is mainly undertaken by private sector consultancies which are able to respond quickly and flexibly to the Department's need for external expertise.

However, whilst there is some truth in that generalisation, to depict education research solely in those terms would be misleading for three reasons. First, on the Government side, the WAG information only relates to 2006-8 and does not include major HEI-led evaluations of policy initiatives funded in earlier years. The external evaluations of the Foundation Phase and Welsh Baccalaureate pilot projects, commissioned from HEIs in England, were completed in, respectively, 2005 and 2006.

Second, though we do not have a clear picture of HEI research into education that is not classified under 'education' it would be a mistake to equate the sector's contribution with RAE-recognised research undertaken by schools of education. For example, bilingualism in education is a major issue for a bilingual country and that is now reflected in Bangor University's ESRC-funded multi-disciplinary Centre for Research on Bilingualism, involving the Schools of Linguistics and English Language, Psychology and Education. Bangor's School of Education does not receive core funding for research from HEFCW but several of its staff with both academic and professional expertise in that area contribute to the Centre's research.

Third, the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to research-informed policy has prompted a series of high profile reports prepared by academic researchers as agenda-setting contributions to policy development. Several of those academics have since published accounts of how the policies in question were informed by research, from the initial identification of policy priorities through to the Government's response to the recommendations in their reports (Rees, 2002; Furlong, et.al, 2007; Daugherty, 2008). It should be noted, however, that for the most part it was a matter of Government asking senior academics to draw upon the evidence already available rather than one of commissioning new research and, by doing so, strengthening research capacity in Wales.

The case of Cardiff University illustrates how the pattern of research activity is more complex than it may appear to be at first sight. Cardiff's research on education doesn't figure at all in HEFCW's reporting of education research because the University chooses to classify all the research activity of its School of Social Sciences as social sciences. Much of that activity in the field of education comprises ESRC funded projects but the Cardiff School also undertakes government-funded policy-related research, for example for the 2007 WAG 'Webb Review' of

further education and for the 2006 UK-wide Skills Survey for which government departments across the UK provided match-funding with the ESRC.

While there are these signs of robust health in some parts of the body of education research in Wales the main conclusions to be drawn from earlier sections of this report remain. In important respects education research in Wales is clearly not healthy. On any conceivable indicator of the quality of HEI education research Wales compares unfavourably with the other three countries of the UK. There are no equivalent indicators of the quality of education research undertaken by other organisations that are based in Wales though a majority seem to be small consultancies.

At the centre of Rees and Power's 'symbiotic relationship' between education research in Wales and the state lies the Welsh Assembly Government. Its education department, DCELLS, is awarding contracts now worth over £2m a year to outside agencies to support, develop and evaluate its impressive range of policy initiatives. Only since the establishment in 2006 of a research and evaluation team within that Department has WAG begun to develop a strategy to guide its own research activities and to address the role of Government in sustaining education research capacity in Wales.

Warnings about the low level of indigenous education research capacity were spelled out clearly enough in Furlong and White's 2001 report and yet from the mid 1990s for nearly a decade nothing of significance emerged from meetings of liaison groups linking the worlds of Government and higher education. On one side of the table were representatives of the HEIs that were competing with each other in the RAE stakes without any discernible sign of a wider commitment to the role of education research in Welsh society. On the other were senior Government officials with aspirations that appeared not to go beyond keeping channels of communication open.

Since 2004 the TLRP extension projects have proved to be a welcome stimulus to research in Wales, as they have been also in Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, it is only with the WERN and AERW initiatives in 2007 and 2008 that the first tentative steps, one HEI-led, the other WAG-led, have been taken to strengthen the country's weak education research infrastructure. The goals of these initiatives will need to be embodied in a broader strategy, with commitments from all the main stakeholders to play their part in building education research capacity in Wales.

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## E. Glossary of Acronyms

ACCAC	Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority
AERW	Applied Education Research in Wales
DCELLS	Department of Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills
ELWa	Education and Learning Wales
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FE	Further Education
GTCW	General Teaching Council for Wales
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ICT	Information and Computing Technology
ITT	Initial Teacher Training
NEWI	North East Wales Institute
NFER	National Foundation for Education Research
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
SIHE	Swansea Institute of Higher Education
SMU	Swansea Metropolitan University
TLRP	Teaching and Learning Research Programme
UWIC	University of Wales Institute Cardiff
WAG	Welsh Assembly Government
WERN	Welsh Education Research Network