Building educational research capacity through inter-institutional collaboration: An evaluation of the first year of the Welsh Education Research Network (WERN)

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an account of the origins, development and evaluation of the Welsh Education Research Network (WERN) during its pilot year. The paper begins by describing the context of Welsh educational research which can be characterised by decline and loss of capacity in most institutions. WERN's response to this challenge has been to employ an approach to capacity building based on a social practices model, and an overview of its methods is then outlined. A summary of internal and external evaluation evidence of the effectiveness of these methods and their impact for individuals, institutions and inter–institutional collaboration follows. A conclusion is then reached that the WERN initiative has been successful but a broader based strategy with commitments from all stakeholders is needed if change is to sustained in the longer term.

Introduction

In recent years the need for capacity building in education across the UK has come into sharper focus because of growing awareness of the impact of an ageing demographic (Mills et al., 2006) and evidence of increasing differentiation between research intensive institutions and other, often teacher education, institutions. Welsh educational research, in advance of other parts of the UK, has for the most part been on a trajectory of decline for more than a decade. A review of educational research activity in Wales undertaken by Furlong and White (2001:35) urgently warned that 'the profile of educational research within Wales … is not strong'. Rees and Power (2007) provide powerful evidence for this trend in analysis of Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) returns since 1991 that demonstrate an overall decline in capacity and a concentration in fewer institutions. More than half of the seventy seven research-active staff returned in Wales for the 2001 RAE was located in two institutions, Cardiff University and Swansea University, but the latter no longer receives core Quality Related (QR) research funding for education from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). Only Cardiff, graded as 5★ in the 2001 RAE received core funding for education research. The other institutions would regard themselves as having strengths in their connectedness with educational practice e.g. pedagogic research. There is a danger that, because this type of research can struggle to attract funding, educational research into pedagogy may wither and education training become divorced from its research base.

The shrinking of capacity has resulted in many researchers in Wales being isolated and having few colleagues with whom they can share and develop expertise. There is a substantial literature that provides evidence of the importance 'informal learning' in the development of new work practices and skills (Davies and Salisbury, 2008). For example, drawing on evidence from an analysis of participation in the research activities undertaken by the Research Capacity Building Network (RCBN), Rees et al. (2007) found that work place based opportunities for acquiring research skills were viewed by participants 'as crucial to their development as accomplished researchers' (p. 773). The Welsh Education Research Network (WERN) aims to build capacity by facilitating collaborative research activity between educational researchers in different institutions, providing opportunities for joint activity and social learning between partners with varied levels of expertise and experience.

Trowler and Knight (2000) maintain that new academics can begin to absorb and enact often taken for granted features of university work by working alongside and with others, although Harrison and McKeon (2008) assert that experiential learning cannot fully take account of the complexities of becoming a scholarly teacher in a new HE setting. However numerous commentators on the nature of professional learning have emphasised that the acquisition of expertise and capacity for making judgements is achieved through combinations of both formal and informal learning (Eraut, 1994; Eraut et al., 2000) This notion of situated learning recognises the social dimension of learning and that inside a 'community of practice' participants learn and benefit from interaction with each other (Wenger, 1998).

WERN Structure and Organisation

WERN was funded by the Economic and Social-Science Research Council (ESRC) and HEFCW for a pilot period between 1st October 2007 and 30th June 2008; this funding has subsequently been extended to July 2009 but this article reports only the evaluations of the initial pilot period. Its membership comprises Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Cardiff University, Glyndŵr University (formerly North East Wales Institute), The Open University in Wales, Swansea Metropolitan University, Swansea University, Trinity College Carmarthen, University of Glamorgan, University of Wales Institute Cardiff and University of Wales Newport. The leadership of WERN is distributed and democratic involving all partner institutions. All decisions about the nature, purpose and direction of WERN were taken by an Executive comprised of one member from each Higher Education Institution (HEI). The day to day running of the Network was conducted by the Chair of the Executive (0.3) and an Administrator (0.4); the Vice-Chair (0.1) was also able to offer some support. The administrative centre was based at Trinity College, Carmarthen. WERN also benefited from the advice and support of an advisory group comprised of experienced academics and stakeholders.

It was decided to create opportunities for social leaning that could be effective within the time frame and funding available. Therefore the principal method of developing capacity was the provision of bursaries to support groups of colleagues from different institutions to work together to write proposals for research funding. An essential criterion for receipt of funding was to demonstrate that the mix of skills and experience within the

group had the potential to build the capacity of the group members. Other WERN activities were chiefly aimed at supporting the bursary groups for example a Virtual Research Environment (VRE) set up under the auspices of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), training work-shops to support bid applications and a research expertise and an interest directory compiled across institutions. A colloquium was also held towards the end of the pilot period to celebrate successful education research activity in Wales.

Evaluation methods

A record of the attendance at all WERN events was kept in order to monitor the support and its distribution across institutions. All participants, at the conclusion of an event, were asked to complete an evaluation form.

As well as carrying out analysis of the applications for bursary funding (N=24), the activities and effectiveness of the funded groups (N=8) were closely monitored by the completion of interim and final reports in March and May 2008 respectively. Bursary group members were asked to complete a questionnaire in May 2008 at the end of the bursary period which asked them to comment in broad terms on their experience, this was returned by thirteen (25 per cent) of those eligible and these qualitative responses were systematically grouped to identify the key aspects of experience shared by individuals.

An external evaluation was conducted by Professor John Gardner of Queen's University in May 2008 and he was provided with documentation that enabled him to track the progress of the initiative, for example, the minutes of Executive and Advisory Group meetings, the applications and reports form bursary groups. He also interviewed a cross section of WERN participants: executive members, advisory group members, bursary group leaders, bursary group members (total N=31), as well as senior members of HEIs (N=5) in Wales who could comment on the impact of the pilot at an institutional, cross-institutional and pan Wales levels.

Since the pilot finished further internal evaluation has continued. All participants have been asked to complete a self evaluation questionnaire which asked them to rate their skill and confidence levels for ten different types of research activity (ranging from identifying a research question to research management and leadership) before and after their involvement in the bursary group. Thirty three bursary group members (65 per cent)

returned the questionnaires and these provided a good cross section of new, second career, mid career and experienced researchers. For each group the average number of research skills reported as having improved was calculated. There were also interviews with six members of the executive to explore their perceptions of the impact of WERN at the institutional level.

Description and Analysis of WERN Activity

Group Bursary Scheme

Although there was only a six week timeframe to find partners and prepare an application, twenty four applications were received for the group bursary scheme. Ten institutions were part of one or more applications (one institution was not able to contribute to an application for logistic reasons), and most (N= 9) were the lead member in at least one application. Information provided by the external evaluation (Gardner, 2008: 10–11) and shown in Table 1 shows the high degree of inter-institutional collaboration in twenty three valid applications (a single institution bid was withdrawn as partners could not be found for that particular research focus).

Of the total number of named applicants (N=93), fifty seven early career researchers (13 male, 44 female) were involved and named in the applications. These ranged from those totally new to research such as ex-head/deputy head teachers, ex-local authority advisors, new initial teacher education (ITE) lecturers to HEI lecturers with one or two internal departmental working papers or a recently acquired doctorate. All the applications fulfilled the basic selection criteria of being cross institutional, having the potential to develop capacity and being of relevance to Wales. The advisory group, in the mode of a commissioning panel, selected the eight successful applications, on the basis of the aforementioned criteria, the quality of the proposal, and the likelihood of the subsequent application to attract funding.

The eight funded bursary groups included in total twenty seven early career researchers (five male and twenty two female) and as shown in Table 2 there was an even spread of experienced and inexperienced researchers. Each funded application received a budget of £13,000 for the bursary period from 1st January to 30th May 2008. All but two institutions had members of staff participating in bursary groups, with a total of fifty one academics in Wales being involved in bursary activity. Each group had iden-

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Table 1 Degree of inter–institutional collaboration in bursary applications (Gardner, 2008)

HEI	Aber	Bangor	Cardiff	Glam	NEWI	Newport	Swan Met	Swan U	Trinity	UWIC
Aber			✓							
Bangor			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Cardiff	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Glam		✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓
NEWI		✓								
Newport		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Swan Met		✓	✓			✓			✓	✓
Swan U			✓	✓		✓			✓	✓
Trinity		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
UWIC		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Totals	1	7	7	6	1	7	5	5	6	7

tified a mentor; for three of the groups these came from Welsh HEIs but the remaining five worked in English universities. The range of funded bursaries gave coverage to substantive research issues across all education phases from the foundation phase to further and higher education, though the majority (N=7) concentrated on research in primary or secondary sectors.

   Discussions in the executive about inclusiveness following the selection of successful bursary applicants concluded with the decision to support unfunded groups as far as resources would allow. As a result all groups not selected for funding were given written, and if they wished verbal, feedback, about the reasons why they had not been selected and how their applica–tions could be improved. The advisory group members felt this formative

Table 2 Research experience of bursary group members

	Years of research experience			
	0	*1–5*	*6–10*	*11+*
Number of staff	15	12	9	15

feedback was essential in helping colleagues to move forward with research design ideas and to increase their awareness of extant research literature that may not have been acknowledged in applications. To this end, the advisory group shared responsibility in writing the constructive commentaries on each application. In the spirit of WERN's aims to foster collaborative learning and build linkages unfunded groups were invited along with funded groups to all WERN training activities and events.

All of the funded groups were expected to have completed their formal funding application by the end of the bursary period, however although all groups had proposals underway, only one was submitted by the end of the pilot period. Nevertheless abstracts had been submitted and papers were subsequently presented at the conferences of the European Conference on Education Research (ECER), the British Educational Research Association (BERA), the Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA), Inquiring Pedagogies (IPED), the International Study of Religion in Central and Eastern Europe Association (ISORECEA), Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), and the British Psychological Society (BPS).

Analysis of both the interim and final reports from the eight groups, and the initial bursary group member questionnaire identified the following benefits accruing from group bursary activity:

• working with a mentor and more experienced colleagues was very valuable in order to build research skills;
• the group offered a non-threatening environment for less experienced researchers to gain experience. It was also seen as supportive environment to build capacity for all team members and their institutions;
• it created a space for intellectual challenge, e.g. exchange of conceptual ideas, chance to reflect;
• opportunities to network, collaborate and gain respect of colleagues were important.

The less satisfactory aspects of the experience were identified as:

• some frustrations due to the mix of experience in the group;
• some difficulties in communication across institutions;
• insufficient meeting time, which could be due to geographical distance between team members, short time frame for turn around of proposals and activity being additional to normal workloads.

For many bursary group members, particularly group leaders, there was a tension between finding the time to provide good learning experiences for less experienced group members and having sufficient time to deliver the expected output – a completed research proposal to a funding body. A number of groups prioritised the former, and as a result did not advance as far as they would have liked with their proposal.

Thirty four of the thirty six interviews conducted by the external evaluator commended the collaborative opportunities for learning offered by the bursary funding. In order to facilitate the learning of new methodologies and techniques, the leaders of some groups also organised specific research training such as a work shop session on the analysis of qualitative data using NVivo software; the development of research questions; the design of a poster for a conference presentation; collaborative bid writing using a whiteboard; practice sessions using Video Stimulated Reflective Dialogue (VSRD); and the interpretation of video samples of teacher practice. Some groups have also held events to further develop the working of the group, for example a seminar on partnership working was held by the rural education bursary group.

The value of mentoring was strongly endorsed by the bursary participants, and this was also highlighted by the external evaluator who remarked that 'it seems reasonable to conclude that the mentoring feature of WERN was a highly successful aspect of the research capacity building' (Gardner, 2008: 6).

The leadership of bursary groups was generally considered to be well managed, inclusive and 'for all of the members new to research, a highly structured and purposeful introduction to a new and important dimension to their professional work' (Gardner, 2008: 17).

WERN Virtual Research Environment (VRE)

A decision was taken when the bid for the WERN pilot was formulated that a VRE should be created but that within the constraints of the time and funding available it should be limited to providing support for the bursary groups. Analysis of usage of the site indicated that by the end of the pilot period there had been 287 log-ins made by fifty nine users. The external evaluation asked interviewees about their use of the VRE and reported:

> Only two projects appeared to be using the VRE to any extent. One group leader reported using it to enable different parts of a literature review to be shared and then combined in a collaborative writing context. The VRE was also used as a vehicle

for sharing PowerPoint presentations and anonymous data. A second group leader reported using the VRE more or less as a repository with some 100 resource texts available to the members of the group … the modest use made in [these] couple of instances did demonstrate that it could add value

(Gardner, 2008: 14–15)

It should be borne in mind that at this stage of WERN's development the VRE was only intended as a technological tool to facilitate project work, and that WERN activities had focused on bringing colleagues together by face to face networking.

WERN Training Events

Two one-day training events were organised to support researchers in Wales; both events were aimed at researchers who were preparing funding proposals, although not exclusively so. The first event 'Writing a research proposal' was well attended, and evaluation feedback was largely positive. The event was commended for its insightful presentations and for enabling valuable opportunities for networking. The second training event talked participants through the complex process of calculating project funding and the Joint Electronic Submission (JES) system. This was less well attended and this can in part be attributed to short notice of the event because of difficul-ties encountered when arranging a speaker and possibly, the geographical challenges for long distance travel. Those who did attend gave largely posi-tive feedback although it was suggested that the presentation would have been enhanced by a second speaker addressing personnel issues such as time management and time buyout.

WERN Colloquium

WERN activity concluded with a Colloquium. The aim of the event was to showcase recent Welsh developments in capacity building and to share find-ings from recently completed TLRP 'Extension to Wales' research projects (Davies and Howes, 2008; Jephcote and Salisbury, 2008; Kennewell et al., 2008; Martin-Jones et al., 2008; cf. this volume). A total of seventy six partic-ipants attended with representation from ten institutions. All eight funded and one unfunded but active group presented their work to date. Posters depicted visually the project foci and formal presentations included rich learning narratives on for example: the refinement of research questions, piloting of research instruments, analysis of initial data sets and how litera-

tures had been navigated by group members. Groups reported on their emergent research proposals, a result of "progressive focusing" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) that had occurred via discussions, reading and guidance from expert mentoring.

> 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 [cf. Lave and Wenger, 1991] – they quite rightly have been centre stage!
>
> [Experienced researcher in bursary group]

Thirty one per cent of those present completed evaluation forms. Levels of satisfaction with the event were high with 84 per cent of respondents rating the event as good or excellent. Delegates commented on the positive atmosphere, and the feeling of a research community that was growing as a result of WERN activity. The opportunities for networking were most frequently cited, although some participants would have appreciated more time for the bursary groups' presentations.

WERN Governance

The WERN pilot was set up as a test of a distributed model of governance. A priority of the Network, even before it had been awarded pilot funding, has been to build collaboration and trust between participating HEIs. This was regarded as important because the sector has been increasingly divided by a competitive ethos. WERN, although administratively based in one institution (Trinity College), was managed by an Executive comprising one representative from each HEI. All institutions contributed the time, travel and subsistence costs of their representatives to attend these meetings. The representatives varied in the status that they occupied in their institution but were all active researchers. The Executive met six times during the nine month pilot to discuss and plan the activities and events. Meetings were rotated around different campuses across Wales. Additional discussion and communication by e-mail and telephone also occurred. The members developed an effective collaborative relationship, and gave generously of their time and effort to make WERN a success. As well as representing their institution on the Executive, the members represented WERN in their institution – encouraging and supporting participation in WERN initiatives.

A very positive evaluation of management and administration was made by the external evaluator, who concluded:

> Key to all of these very positive sentiments appears to have been the combination of the supportive and non-directive tenor of the approach taken by the chair, vice-chair and administrator, their widely recognised and motivational enthusiasm and passion, and their much appreciated industry and endeavour in making the initiative work.
>
> (Gardner, 2008: 17)

Evaluation of WERN's Impact

The impact of pilot initiatives can be traced at three levels – individual, institutional and pan Wales.

Individual

A total of 110 academics in the education sector in Wales engaged directly with WERN activities, mostly as part of the group bursary scheme. The external evaluation included an interview with a cross section of these participants and all 36 interviewees responded to a specific question seeking their general impression on the worth of the initiative. Responses were classified as excellent (6), very good (16), good (9), negative or ambiguous (5).

> Comments associated with the 'Excellent' impression were effusive and included 'absolutely brilliant' and 'profound experience', while those associated with a 'Very Good' impression included 'extremely valuable', 'innovative', 'far-sighted', 'contemporary', 'very impressed' and 'timely'. More circumspect 'Good' category comments included 'on the whole positive' and 'doing well' … Although a small minority, those who were more ambiguous or even negative in their views on the initiative made a number of important points in what might otherwise be perceived as potentially defeatist or cynical comments. The comments included: 'a noble idea but too little too late', 'a curate's egg–potentially good but too ambitious', 'the right idea but too rushed' and 'pleasing but may be too late'.
>
> (Gardner, 2008: 17–18)

Thirty two bursary group members who responded to the self evaluation questionnaire (97 per cent) were of the opinion that they had improved their skills as a result of group bursary activity. Respondents were grouped according to levels of research experience: early career researchers (ECR, N=10), second career researchers (SCR, N=7), mid-career researchers
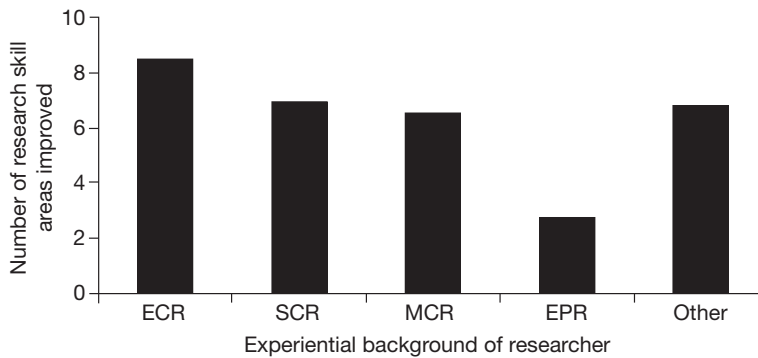
Figure 1
**Comparison of self reported improvement in research skills of bursary
group participants, shown according to previous research experience**

(MCR, N=4), experienced and published researchers (EPR, N=8) and
others (for example, experienced researchers but in an entirely different field,
N=4). For each group the average number of research skills reported as
having improved was calculated and Figure 1 below enables a comparison.
The questionnaire results are congruent with the findings of the external
evaluation that the bursary group members perceived their research skills to
have improved as a result of the bursary group experiences.

Institutional

All eleven HEIs in Wales with education or related departments actively
participated in the leadership of WERN with the exception of one, and this
was because the system of staff engagement with research, with many part-
time tutors, did not fit well with the structure of WERN activities.
Institutional participation and the quality of synergies that had begun to
emerge were a focus of the external evaluation and the following comments
were made:

> Institutional support was universally reported as positive and generous for both the
> objectives of WERN and WERN itself … comments made pointed to considerable
> impact, sometimes described as great interest and sometimes as 'excitement' in
> institutions and their relevant departments.

(Gardner, 2008: 20)

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A crucial issue in institutional involvement was making staff time available for research activity.

> However, strains did exist and were becoming more of a problem as time went on. A small number of interviewees (7) spoke of difficulties in making contributions in the context of full teaching timetables, and arrangements for buying out teaching were not always successful. Several interviewees explained that one reason for this was the difficulty in finding a suitable substitute for the specialisms of some of the lecturers involved.
>
> (Gardner, 2008: 20)

The bursary funding was an attempt to resolve this issue by 'buying out' staff time. It was apparent that this was only partially successful, with some institutions still unable to free staff because of short time frames and lack of appropriate substitute staff.

Interviews with Executive members indicated that WERN had some impact in all institutions although, as would be expected, the extent varied. It was widely reported as bringing new opportunities to staff in teacher education,

> To date, the impact of WERN has been one of enthusing colleagues and in particular members of staff who have not had a chance to do research because in their heavy teaching workloads there has not been the space and time to do so.
>
> [Executive member]

WERN also contributed to some shift in consciousness in more research intensive institutions; colleagues in these institutions were 'much more mindful of the work situations and constraints of those working in non QR funded places and more aware of the luxury of being able to carry out research'

Six institutions were the lead for at least one of the bursary groups but even in institutions where there was not this level of involvement, the impact was felt, 'WERN has been a catalyst and has made a huge contribution to changing the context of research in my department'.

Looking to the future another Executive member identified WERN's method of organisation as holding important promise for bringing about change,

> If WERN could continue in the same spirit with its outsider role and its participatory and non-elitist ethos it may well be one of the most important change agents for departments like mine … somehow I see the WERN model having more effect in creating actual research activity than the internal, home-grown strategies and structures that we have. I used the word 'baggage' just now and

> WERN has no baggage. It has no hierarchy and no deeply rooted preconceptions or personal agendas held by powerful gatekeepers. That seems so important and should be maintained.
>
> [Executive member]

Inter-institutional Impact

WERN sustained an unprecedented degree of pan Wales educational research collaboration during its pilot period which occurred at a number of different systemic levels.

Networking between members of bursary groups – eight groups each with between two and four institutions in collaboration – was evident. This has sown the seeds of inter-institutional clusters of research specialism that have been productive during the pilot period but also have potential for future alliances,

> 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]

At the level of the Executive the involvement of all institutions has been sustained and as a result relationships based on mutual regard and trust have deepened. At present plans are being drawn up in Wales for three regional centres for teacher education; the relationships that have formed in WERN will provide a sound basis for developing a shared inter-institutional research culture in each of the centres. Joint events such as the Colloquium were found to generate a huge shared enthusiasm, and it may be that they signal the beginnings of a community of educational researchers in Wales.

Conclusion

The evidence presented leads us to conclude that the WERN pilot has been successful in stimulating and developing inter-institutional collaboration and this has provided opportunities for sharing experience and expertise.

The Group Bursary Scheme has been a productive method for gathering together often isolated colleagues to engage in research. It has the potential

to develop inter-institutional clusters of research specialism that have partic-
ular value and relevance to Wales. The social practices model has been
viewed as effective by participants but for some group members a tension
was experienced between development of research capacity and the delivery
of promised outputs within the required timeframe. This suggests that
capacity building, even when using a social practices model, will not take
place entirely incidentally and requires the dedication of time to specifically
facilitate the learning of less experienced colleagues.

The model of governance tested by the WERN pilot was found to be
robust. A key ingredient to this success was the composition of the
Executive. All were active researchers and this was crucial in enabling knowl-
edgeable, 'grounded' research decisions and ensuring WERN was
connecting with the research community in each HEI.

Despite the constraints of time and funding, WERN has achieved
tangible outputs and alliances have been formed that have potential for part-
nership and funding in the future. The external evaluation 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)

Education research in Wales has suffered a long, and severe period of decline
in all institutions except Cardiff University, therefore WERN can only be a
start to the reversal of this trend. Although not underestimating the consid-
erable and continuing need for consciousness raising and development of
expertise, the outcomes of WERN pilot are pleasing and further incre-
mental progress is anticipated over the next year.

However two further developments could make a crucial contribution to
achieving sustainable change. Firstly, progress to build capacity will be slow
unless imperatives to collaborate and build research capacity become essen-
tial criteria in invitations to tender and calls for research (Davies and
Salisbury, 2008). In the same way as the adage 'what gets assessed gets taught',
a similar norm applies here – 'what draws down funding will get done!'

Secondly, the future of educational research in Wales must be regarded by
all members of the research community in Wales as a shared responsibility.
The Welsh Assembly Government and others such as local authorities who
fund and use research should engage more closely with HEIs as providers of
research to inform policy development. The HEIs must put in place the

support and infrastructure to ensure that time and resources for research are present. Researchers must be encouraged and enabled to prioritise a commitment to research despite the daily competition from other agendas.

It is in the interest of all parties for Wales to have a vibrant education research community which can contribute to the role of education in Welsh civil society. To achieve sustainable change WERN must become part of a broader, long term strategy with commitments from all of these stakeholders to support the growth of educational research capacity in Wales (Daugherty and Davies, 2008).

Acknowledgements

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