

# Research News

## *Welsh Government research*

Following the Assembly elections in May 2016, research is playing an increasingly important role for the Welsh Government in terms of informing education policy developments, evaluating reforms and being considered as part of the day-to-day delivery of education at all levels of teaching and leadership. This is essential to making improvements in the attainment, skills and well-being of learners and to ensure the conditions in which that can take place.

Building capacity for research production and use will be key and coordinating the various components of an education evidence ‘eco-system’ in Wales will be needed to ensure that we utilise and build on the skills and contribution that many organisations are keen to play.

The Welsh Government has a responsibility for overseeing that work and ensuring it is integrated across the reforms taking place at all levels of education. This is something the OECD highlighted in their recent report (OECD, 2017) on school reform in Wales, building on the review that they conducted in 2014 (OECD, 2014).

One of the recommendations of the 2014 OECD review was to strengthen the link between evidence, research and policy. Wales has taken important steps forward on this issue. These include a more strategic use of research by the Welsh Government to inform its policy decisions, including the monitoring and evaluation of many of its policies and programmes. Wales should continue to invest in building its research and assessment capacity at all levels of the system. This will be essential for the successful implementation of its curriculum reform ... This calls for evaluation of the different policies of the reform journey to understand their progress and impact; these evaluation efforts should be guided by the assessment and evaluation framework under development. (OECD, 2017: 47)

So, we need to keep up the momentum where improvements have been made and continue applying lessons from research, especially if we are to aim for the data- and research-rich education system envisaged. Some broader challenges relate to that objective, including:

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- building capacity for educational research (within HEIs, but also consortia, providers, schools);
- using research as a tool to support curriculum and pedagogical developments;
- applying evidence to inform teaching and learning as part of *Successful Futures*. For instance, what research is necessary to test the new curriculum and assessment arrangements – both in terms of design and implementation. And what measures (assessments, data, surveys) might be needed at different levels in the system to help understand progress against Donaldson’s ‘Four Purposes’?
- producing research to support and understand the implementation of the recently enacted Well-being of Future Generations Act, and the Rights of Children and Young People Act, and those may lead to a re-thinking of the type of data collected to monitor and evaluate Welsh Government policies more widely;
- identifying standards for the production and use of research methodologies and quality of evidence needed to support policy and practice;
- valuing the behaviours associated with evidence-informed practice and policy (such as being committed to using the most robust evidence and being curious and equivocal in the development of innovative approaches); and
- being ambitious in considering how to enhance the infrastructure needed to ensure that practitioners and leaders can develop their own skills and knowledge and embed research practice and apply evidence in their work.

So, the Welsh Government has a two-fold interest in educational research. On the one hand, we need to provide a wider policy-related steer to make sure that research and evidence is embedded at all levels to ensure that we meet the aspiration of a self-improving education system. On the other hand, we need to lead by example by conducting our own research and applying evidence in policy-making. We have an emerging tradition of doing what is more than applying lip service to research. Rather it is about really valuing the contribution of research and using it actively so that it makes an impact, whilst acknowledging the challenges for getting evidence into the policy-making process or cycle.

At the heart of that is the ambition to construct with policy-makers and external stakeholders and research suppliers a programme of research that is of high quality and which is designed to be robust in terms of quality standards and well utilised in terms of impact.

In the coming months/years, it is envisaged that our programme for research and statistics will include the following new areas of work:

### *Schools*

The development of an Education Research Strategy for Wales which will include a focus on increasing education research capacity in Wales:

- research and evaluation to support the development and implementation of the new curriculum and assessment arrangements;
- a focus on well-being;
- research to support the investment in School Improvement;
- evaluation of the Pupil Deprivation Grant and Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant;
- annual data collections and a wide range of publications relating to school census, national tests, national curriculum assessments, school performance, attendance and exclusions, national categorisation of schools;
- maintenance and development of My Local School and All Wales Core Data Sets;
- inclusion in the above of the changes required under the new Review of Qualifications indicators; and
- consideration of data requirements related to accountability.

### *Post-16 education*

Following on from the announcement of a single strategic authority, responsible for overseeing all aspects of post-compulsory education and training, there will be a requirement for research over the next couple of years to inform the development of the new body:

- proposals for student support and higher education funding set out in the Diamond review (Diamond, 2016) will require research over the next few years to inform the implementation and evaluation of the proposals;
- possible research in respect of support for A level delivery;
- there will be an evaluation of the early years' workforce programme funded by the European Social Fund;
- regular series of publications around post-16 education, qualification levels, youth service and NEET (young people not in education, employment or training);

- continued development work on destination measures, link to DfE Learner Education Outcome project and consistent performance measures.

*Welsh-medium education and Welsh language in education*

Research on Welsh-medium immersion provision, following on from an initial exploratory phase undertaken in 2016–17:

- research and evaluation to support the development and delivery of Welsh in the new curriculum and assessment arrangements; and
- analysis of school performance by Welsh-language characteristics.

All our ongoing research and statistical outputs are pre-announced and reported on the Welsh Government's statistics and research webpages: <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/?skip=1&lang=en>.

Correspondence over any of the education-related research and statistics reports Welsh Government publish would be welcomed, as well as ideas or discussion relating to proposals for research and analytical work from practitioners, leaders and researchers.

*References*

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*WISERD Education*

The past year has been another successful year for WISERD Education, but we still need to work hard to ensure the sustainability of our capacity-building activities and the continuation of the WISERD Education Multi-cohort study – which is growing into a really valuable resource for researchers. In this brief report, we outline some of the key activities from the past year, as well as upcoming events.

*Educational research in higher education in Wales: the national survey*

As some of you may remember, WISERD Education undertook a national survey last year in order to assess the level of research activity in the field of education in Welsh universities. A report of the findings is now published, and can be downloaded from the WISERD website ([www.wiserd.ac.uk](http://www.wiserd.ac.uk)). The survey was undertaken against the background of increasing concerns about the volume and sustainability of educational research in Wales, particularly in relation to the declining levels of submission by Welsh universities to successive research assessment exercises.

The findings of the survey contain both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ news. In terms of positive findings, the survey showed that there *are* significant amounts of educational research going on in Wales. Only 5 per cent of respondents claim to be not engaged with research at all. The majority undertake research with their students and almost half write and publish for academic audiences. The survey also indicates a relatively high level of grant-seeking and significant levels of collaborative activity – not only with colleagues, but internationally. In addition, there was a strong commitment to upholding the value of research as essential for high quality teacher education.

However, while things may not be as bleak as the research assessment exercises suggest, this does not mean that there are not real grounds for concern. The survey revealed that colleagues face significant barriers in developing their research. The barriers most commonly cited include heavy teaching and administrative loads, as well as lack of confidence and experience. It is evident that there are low levels of time allocated to research. Time pressures seem particularly acute for those involved in initial teacher education. In terms of confidence and experience, there appears to be relatively low levels of specialist research expertise. Perhaps most important, the respondents indicated that there are relatively limited

levels of institutional support for research. While the overwhelming majority reported that their university encouraged them to be research active, the levels of investment and infrastructure seem quite low.

### Events

At the time of our last 'round-up', we were about to start a residential writing week at Gregynog. I think all those who attended would agree that it was a useful exercise. We held our second writing week in April with new colleagues. After the first Gregynog Writing Workshop, colleagues wanted to find a way of staying in touch with each other, so we set up a WISERD Education Facebook page. We would really like the group to grow and become a channel for dialogue between colleagues across Wales. Please do think about joining. You can find the WISERD Education Facebook page on: [www.facebook.com/groups/1073939332644936/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/1073939332644936/).

The WISERD annual conference provides colleagues with the opportunity to network and discuss cutting-edge research from Wales and beyond. The 2017 conference theme (5–6 July, Bangor) – 'The Decade of Disruption' – reflected the significant changes in Welsh schools, colleges and universities over recent years. Last year there was a really strong Welsh presence at BERA's annual conference in Leeds and there were many fascinating papers from Wales – and particularly from early career researchers.

### Publications

We continue to publish from the WISERD Education Multi-Cohort Study (WMCS) data. Recent publications include:

- Pearce, S., Power, S. and Taylor, C. (2017). 'Private tutoring in Wales: patterns of private investment and public provision'. *Research Papers in Education*. DOI:10.1080/02671522.2016.1271000.
- Power, S., Taylor, C. and Horton, K. (2017). 'Sleepless in school? Young people's bedtime rest and routines'. *Journal of Youth Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2016.1273522.
- Smith, K. (2016). 'Fy ardal/my neighbourhood: How might pupils' orientations to their neighbourhood contribute to a pedagogy of place?'. *Environmental Education Research*. DOI: 10.1080/13504622.2015.1118747.

We think it's really important that the WMCS data are used and would love to hear from anyone who thinks that they might be interested in exploring its potential for their own use. At the time of writing, the survey questions and data are being made available through the WISERD Data Portal. Do have a look. The Dashboard can be reached at <http://data.wiserd.ac.uk/> where you will find a link to WISERD Education.

Finally, on a sad note, we were very saddened to hear of the death of Professor Howard Tanner on Christmas Day. Howard was always a valued advocate for WISERD Education and his death is a sad loss to Wales and to educational research generally.

Sally Power and Chris Taylor

### *USCET Cymru*

In the light of the closer involvement of schools in initial teacher education (ITE) under the Furlong agenda, UCET Cymru has been re-launched as USCET Cymru – the Universities and Schools Council for the Education of Teachers. It had its inaugural meeting in October and met again on 24 February. The purpose of USCET will be to:

- represent accredited ITE providers and other USCET members in discussions with the Welsh Government, Estyn, the Education Workforce Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, UCAS teacher training and other relevant organisations;
- agree and promote policy positions relating to teacher education and education research (while allowing for distinct positions to be adopted by individual members), including (but not restricted to): recruitment to teacher education programmes; the content of teacher education; quality assurance; partnerships between schools, universities and other organisations; the links between ITE and early and continuous professional development; and education research; and
- share knowledge and expertise on all aspects of teacher education and education research.

The USCET Cymru Research Working Group plans to run a Welsh teacher education research conference at Bangor University in November 2017. This will coincide with the Sir Hugh Owen public lecture, which this year will be given by Professor Tom Crick of Cardiff Metropolitan

University, member of the Welsh Government digital competence working group and chair of the new National Network of Excellence in Science and Technology. The aims of the conference – which will follow the keynote – will be:

- to highlight the importance of research to the ITE agenda in Wales;
- to celebrate educational research undertaken by and in association with ITE providers in Wales and its contribution to learning and teaching on ITE programmes and more widely; and
- to capture and disseminate findings from the broad range of school-based research being undertaken in Wales.

Workshops highlighting creative pedagogy in ITE from the previous ‘best practice sharing event’ held in Llandrindod Wells in 2016 are now on the USCET website at [www.ucet.ac.uk/cymru-arts/creativity](http://www.ucet.ac.uk/cymru-arts/creativity).

Members of USCET Cymru recently participated in the OECD International Workshop – strengthening capacity for evidence-based, research-informed pedagogical practice in Wales, held in Cardiff from 15–17 March. This event brought together university and school-based teacher educators with experts from Australia, Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, Singapore and the USA to consider how to build research capacity in ITE providers and how to make the findings from research easily available to student teachers and schools. The establishment of a national research repository and graduate school to provide doctoral qualifications for teacher educators were two proposals to emerge from the workshop.

Professor Dan Davies

### *Estyn*

Each year, Estyn collects substantial evidence from inspections, follow-up visits and thematic reviews to provide independent, high quality advice to inform the development of national policy. Our findings and reports provide an authoritative voice on education and training in Wales, and they are an important source of information for researchers as well as teachers.

The chief inspector’s annual report provides insight into the educational outcomes and the quality of provision and leadership for each sector of education and training that Estyn inspects. This year, the first section of

the report explores what works well in professional learning and includes case studies exemplifying effective practice, as well as questions for schools and other providers to use as a starting point for reflection as part of their self-evaluation.

In addition to our core inspection work, the cabinet secretary commissions Estyn on a yearly basis to provide advice or reports on educational matters for the Welsh Government (the annual Remit Letters). The advice Estyn provides is for a wide range of working groups such as our involvement in Successful Futures education reform by providing advice and support for the Welsh Government's pioneer schools' network programme and HMI representation on Welsh Government working and implementation groups. The annual remit letter includes requests for detailed advice on important aspects of education to be provided in the form of thematic review reports.

During the 2016 calendar year, we published twelve thematic reports, including: the provision, developments and issues in modern foreign languages; the moderation of teacher assessment at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3: a review of accuracy and consistency; *Pupil Participation: a best practice guide*; and a national review of the quality of education and training in adult health and social care.

The thematic reports address matters that are of central concern to policy-makers and, in 2016, we also published three surveys relating to the progress of groups of vulnerable learners. These reports focused on: mapping provision for learners in receipt of education other than at school; raising the attainment, achievement and aspiration of children who are looked after – a best practice report; and learner progress and destinations in independent specialist colleges. We also completed a review on Local Authority Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) which evaluated several aspects including: the impact of WESPs on improving planning for Welsh-medium education; the influence that WESPs have had in stimulating and supporting actions to raise standards of Welsh and Welsh second language; and the degree to which the statutory responsibility of local authorities in producing WESPs allows for cooperation with, and support from, regional consortia school improvement services.

The key findings from the other four published thematic reports are shown below.

1. The *Leadership and primary school improvement* report (Estyn, 2016a) builds on Estyn's earlier thematic reports about *Best practice in leadership*

development (Estyn, 2015) and *Twelve secondary school improvement journeys* (Estyn, 2013). The report uses first-hand evidence from visits we undertook to case-study schools to identify a model for primary school improvement. The model sets out the characteristics of leadership and leadership development commonly demonstrated by schools at different stages of their improvement journey, from starting the journey through to building momentum and sustaining high standards. From our evidence, we found that strong leadership and management establish the following elements:

- a common vision, culture and sense of direction;
  - a focus on improving teaching and learning;
  - investment in staff development and professional learning;
  - honest self-evaluation and systematic improvement planning.
2. The *Best practice in the creative arts in key stages 3 and 4* report (Estyn, 2016b) extends the work that we reported on last year about creative arts at Key Stage 2. From schools visited this year, at Key Stages 3 and 4 we found that, through learning in the arts, many pupils gain important life skills of independent learning, planning and problem-solving. Many pupils value the opportunities that the creative arts give them to express their own ideas, for example, they find that practice in presenting their personal responses gives them greater confidence in other areas of school life and work. However, although many good arts departments plan well to develop pupils' digital skills, in a minority of schools, in art and design and in drama, there are not enough opportunities for pupils to produce creative work using digital media.
  3. *The impact of the Additional Training Graduate Programme (Teach First) in Wales* report (Estyn, 2016c) found that most participants display very good professional values and attitudes and establish effective relationships with teachers and pupils. These participants are highly motivated to improve their teaching, are reflective and make valuable links between educational theory and classroom practice. The survey also found that although many of the Additional Training Graduate Programme participants make good progress in their teaching, too few achieve their potential of becoming excellent teachers, and a few participants do not complete the programme successfully and do not achieve Qualified Teacher Status.
  4. The *Adult Community Learning in Wales* report (Estyn, 2016d) provides an

overview of standards, provision and leadership in adult community learning (ACL) in Wales. The survey found that in most ACL partnerships, financial reductions have had a significant impact on provision and staffing levels. In many cases, ACL partnerships have had to reduce courses and the number of venues. Yet ACL partnerships maintain a strong commitment to providing learning opportunities for hard-to-reach learners, such as the long-term unemployed, single parents, minority ethnic groups, people with physical and mental health needs, the isolated and the elderly, and those who have had poor experiences of statutory education. In many cases, partnerships have formed new alliances with other providers that have access to funding, but do not have the capacity to deliver the required courses.

Our reports are intended to contribute to wider thinking and to current debates in policy areas such as planning for the new 3–16 curriculum, as well as sharing case studies of practice across all sectors. The forthcoming programme of thematic reports during 2017 promises to be equally relevant with reviews underway focused on curriculum areas such as: science and design technology at Key Stage 2; humanities at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3; as well as topics on healthy relationships, financial education, and play and active learning in Year 1 and Year 2. For two of our thematic surveys, we will also disseminate our findings through a best practice conference and by developing resources for schools and providers to share among the regional consortia. All our thematic surveys can be viewed at [www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-reports](http://www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-reports).

### References

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