

Welsh Education Research Network, WERN

## Phase II Evaluation

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## **A Note on this Report**

This evaluation was based on interviews with a range of WERN II participants (see Table 1), an electronic e-survey of participants (see tables 2 and 3), minutes and other papers from meetings of the Executive and Advisory groups, and the reports and other outputs from the individuals and groups that have undertaken WERN II research activities. My information and data collection opportunities also extended to two one-day events during WERN II, a WERN institutional managers' meeting on educational research and a colloquium at which reports from most of the WERN activities were presented.

The small samples of participants involved in the interviews and e-survey demanded a degree of caution when dealing with what were often singular responses. The reason for this is that there was no means of assessing the extent to which they were isolated or more widely held in the overall participant population. The geographic (institutional) spread of the interviews was also limited to the Cardiff, Swansea and Glamorgan areas and there are indications that the anonymous e-survey did not necessarily extend the reach.

It is therefore important to stress that the judgments and conclusions presented here arise from my synthesis of the limited data sets, the meeting minutes and project reports, and my formal and informal engagements with WERN participants and events. In the round, this constitutes a formidable evidence base and the report is my interpretation of that evidence.

## Executive Summary

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- S1. WERN II was designed to extend WERN I by introducing a variety of research capacity building approaches. In addition to the WERN I-type bursary for groups planning a grant application, WERN II offered competitive awards for small-scale studies, collaborative fellowships (supported by mentors) and a local authority collaborative project (see Table 4). WERN II also hosted a review of the implications for Wales of outcomes from the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) projects.
- S2. WERN II was considered by the interviewees to be a success though there was a variety in the conceptions of this success. For example, success was perceived as building on WERN I by 'mopping' up proposals that had not been supported in WERN I, extending WERN I activities, consolidating the educational research community that WERN I had fostered and diversifying into new activities. Concerns expressed included the perception that an emphasis on school-phase education had marginalized other aspects of education and that the importance of capacity building (in terms of training courses etc) had been lost.
- S3. The range of content for the various activities in WERN II confirms that a variety of important areas was addressed and that a significant research effort had clustered around early years education (see Table 5).
- S4. Multi-institutional collaborative groups were less in evidence in WERN II than in WERN I with institutions collaborating on average with 2.2 other institutions compared with 2.9 for WERN I (see tables 6 and 7). The majority of collaborations (6/9) featured pairs of institutions.
- S5. The collaborative fellowships were particularly successful in promoting the professional learning of the individuals involved. The quality of the support from the mentors was unanimously appreciated and praised, with a variety of outputs and opportunities (off-campus meetings, conference attendance, collaborative writing, 1-to-1 training and so on) spinning off what was a relatively modest amount of funding (£2,250 per fellowship).
- S6. A wide range of professional development was recorded by participants in WERN II. Skills featured frequently in these responses and fell into four main categories: research methods, communication, organizational and personal/interpersonal.
- S7. WERN II was roundly commended for continuing to raise the profile of educational research and capacity building, and the institutional links and collaborations that had been promoted. There were reports of raised awareness of the importance and breadth of educational research at institutional level, with various indicators such as staff taking up doctoral study, the initiation of a 'research day', the impact of dissemination of WERN-based research findings on teaching, and discussions on the interface between research and practice at management level. Other reports, however, indicated that there was little or no evidence of institutional impact.
- S8. Vice-chancellors and the senior management of higher education institutions were viewed as the key influencers in achieving a better research-teaching interface in institutions, particularly in facilitating existing or nascent research cultures through the provision of time and staff resources.
- S9. Respondents variously distinguished between engagement in research and engagement with research. The requirement to use research to support reflection on one's own practice (in its 'keeping up with the literature' rather than 'carrying out a

project' meaning) was mentioned by several respondents. However, a case was explicitly made for active engagement by staff in research.

- S10. Some respondents argued the need for institutions dominated by teacher education programmes to recognize the benefits of research-informed teacher education and to ring changes in their workload policies and general disposition to research activity. Two of these people, from different teaching-intensive institutions, qualified their views by arguing that it was also important to ensure that time for teaching and administrative activities did not expand inefficiently, inadvertently curtailing time for scholarship and research.
- S11. The two phases of WERN had engaged some 150 academic staff in funded research activities (not counting the considerable voluntary inputs of Executive and Advisory group members, the unfunded mentors and voluntary TLRP reviewers). Almost every institution had members of staff participating in one or more of the funded activities in WERN II (see Table 8).
- S12. In the main, the bursary group activities (see Table 5) built on work that had been initiated in WERN I, though it should be emphasized that some of these activities had been prompted by existing research strengths. For example the rural education, 'working lives', ICT and Foundation Stage topics had strong links to previous work and, indeed, were proposed by members of WERN I groups. Two of the WERN II awards – relating to music education and bullying in the early years – had been successfully re-worked from unfunded WERN I applications.
- S13. A positive community dimension was mentioned by participants, with the WERN II Colloquium as a particular indicator of this success. The outcomes of this community development included a perceived reduction in 'suspicion' and improved relationships brought about by the collaboration of research-intensive and non-research-intensive institutions. However, one interviewee reported feeling that their personal presence in WERN activities often seemed to be over-shadowed by other participants' perceptions of their institution.
- S14. As a collaborative forum comprising representatives from every institution, the Executive Group was widely acknowledged to have played a major role in ensuring the success and cohesion of WERN II. There are certainly grounds for recommending that future capacity building efforts should retain the same type of forum and cooperative processes. A small number of counter-views on the efficacy of the Executive Group tended to relate to the working processes and functions of the Group rather than the principle of a collaborative forum or network.
- S15. The Advisory Group drew widespread praise for its expertise and selfless contributions of time and effort to the cause of reviving educational research in Wales. It was widely regarded as fair in its evaluations of proposals but there was a small number of counter-views.
- S16. When asked how WERN II might have been altered to improve the benefits for individuals and institutions the most frequent comment related to the need to have increased time built into the programme. Opinion was divided in the e-survey (see Table 9) on whether there was sufficient time for making applications. Most of the respondents felt that the WERN II application process was clearly outlined but almost equal numbers contested the view that WERN II was sufficiently funded.
- S17. There was a degree of confidence that individuals would maintain their research interests and skills and that contacts initiated by both phases of WERN would endure. However, counter-views perceived little sustained impact on institutions owing to the limited period of operation of WERN and a lack of institutional commitment. It was also felt by some that in a post-WERN situation the inter-institutional networks created would be less likely to survive than single institution groupings.

- S18. A number of interviewees looked to HEFCW and WAG investment to sustain the momentum and growth of an educational research community, and specifically the networking and collaborative ventures. There was ambivalence in the e-survey about the value of WERN as a “... *solid platform of experience of the bidding process for institutional teams and inter-institutional networks to create good proposals in the future*” with as many respondents agreeing as expressing uncertainty. However, only a small minority disagreed outright with the proposition.
- S19. Relatively high majorities (70%+) of the e-survey respondents (see Table 10) felt that in any future development:
- Funds for researchers and doctoral students should be distributed across institutions;
  - Research should not simply be focused on Wales-related issues;
  - Institutional benefits must be clear and tangible to ensure the full commitment of institutional managers;
  - High quality research will be the best foundation for capacity building in Wales;
  - Opportunities must be open for all institutions;
  - Funding sources from across Wales and beyond must be actively pursued.

### Conclusions

- S20. All things considered I feel confident that the various sources of data and information in this evaluation have provided me with a sufficient grasp of the issues to enable me tentatively to propose a set of conclusions.
- S21. It is clear to me, therefore, that it would be a major mistake to allow the gains in collaboration, capacity building and awareness of the importance of research to improving education and teacher education, made through WERN activities, simply to fade away.
- S22. Responsibility for developing and improving the educational research base in Wales, however, cannot simply be laid at any one group's door.
- S23. There is general consensus within the WERN community on the following points:
- Educational research is a principal means for promoting improvement and positive change in education in all sectors.
  - Without an appropriate level of research activity, designed to increase understanding of how education can be improved at the system, social and individual levels *within its own context*, any nation risks an unhealthy stasis in the quality of educational experience and outcomes for all of its citizens.
  - Educational research is valuable across a spectrum of levels.  
At one end, for example, existing research-based knowledge and literature can be used continuously to inform and promote improvements in practice at the level of practitioners and their institutions, schools or workplaces.  
At the other end, research of the highest quality carried out locally can contribute both to significant changes in national policy and practice and to global knowledge building.
  - Wales has the potential to increase its contribution to UK and international research excellence and to this end it needs a highly skilled community of educational researchers.
- S24. The evaluation of WERN has shown that:

- It is possible, at a relatively modest level of funding, to generate increased awareness of the importance of educational research and to promote research capacity building and collaborative research activity across institutions that may differ significantly in mission (e.g. institutions that focus on different aspects or sectors of education, or which are either predominantly teaching or research-intensive).
- There is a viable and growing core of research expertise in a number of specific policy and practice areas, for example post-compulsory and adult education, rural education, ICT in education and early years education.
- Despite involvement in WERN, some teaching and/or teacher education-intensive institutions appear not yet to have espoused and facilitated, at an institutional level, the development of a research-informed or research-active culture for improvement.
- WERN, as a pan-Wales forum for inter-institutional representation and engagement on educational research matters, has brought considerable benefits to institutions and individual researchers, and the overall well-being of educational research in Wales.

S25. WERN II has in my view brought increased focus to the implications for all stakeholders in educational research. The statements that follow are generalized to all members of each stakeholder community. However, I should like to emphasize that I do recognize there are those who need to consider the advice and those who already espouse and act upon the ideas or good practices involved.

- For government there is a need to provide a strategic lead in defining the nation's educational research requirements, to sponsor competitive research funding programmes and to challenge institutions to develop their use of and engagement in research.

Action in these areas can be considerably strengthened by a purposeful liaison with institutional representatives, e.g. in some form of WERN-like forum, in the planning and outworking of any strategy or programme.

- For managers in higher education institutions there is a need to evaluate their institutional investment in educational research and its potential to improve their programmes.

They need to consolidate any strengths and address any weaknesses in their educational research activities. Where appropriate, they must consider how best to address the workload implications of improving the teaching-research interface.

There is also a need to be pro-active in liaising with government and other potential research users to identify strategic developments and needs in educational research.

- For individual academics there is the need to recognize that they must engage with or in educational research if its potential to improve their practice and their students' learning outcomes is to be realized.

In teaching intensive contexts specifically, including teacher education, there is a need to ensure that the personal management of teaching and administration is optimized in order to facilitate engagement with or in educational research.

## Main Report

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### Introduction

1. The second phase of the Welsh Education Research Network, WERN, was funded by HEFCW (£150,000) and ESRC (£50,000) on the basis of a proposal that sought to consolidate and extend the gains made in the first phase. It was scheduled to run from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2008 to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2009.
2. The stated aim of the overall WERN programme was to:  
... build, by collaboration between HEIs, an educational research capacity that is of high quality and of relevance to policy and practice in Wales. Without compromising quality, WERN aims to be inclusive of all institutions and fair and equitable in the distribution of opportunities offered by its funding.
3. In this second phase, WERN II (2008-09), this aim was expanded into the following objectives:
  - To develop clusters of inter-institutional research expertise in key areas of policy and practice for Wales
  - To develop, using a social practices model of professional learning, the research expertise and experience of individual researchers
  - To develop awareness amongst institutional managers of the importance of creating or further developing a research culture in their institution
  - To grow and sustain a community of educational researchers in Wales
  - To sponsor research that builds engagement between research and policy/practice communities and that may have the potential to stimulate future research partnerships
  - To create and maintain mechanisms to support research and take-up of WERN funding opportunities
  - To maintain collaboration between institutional partners by a democratic and accountable governance structure

### Notes on the Evaluation

4. This evaluation takes the conventional approach of examining the extent to which the objectives of WERN II have been met. In making judgements on the latter I have used a number of information and data sources and these have included interviews with a range of WERN II participants, an electronic survey of participants, minutes and other papers from meetings of the Executive and Advisory groups, and the reports and other outputs from the individuals and groups that have undertaken WERN II research activities. My information and data collection opportunities also extended to two one-day events during WERN II, a WERN institutional managers' meeting on educational research and a colloquium at which reports from most of the WERN activities were presented. It is worth pausing at this point, therefore, to consider the evidence base and any implications there are for the strength of my conclusions.
5. As will be detailed later in this report, the samples of participants in both the interviews and the electronic e-survey were relatively small. It is prudent, therefore, to recognize that the representativeness of the respondents in relation to the whole group of WERN II



participants, and the diversity of possible opinions expressed, is somewhat short of optimum. For the interview survey the sample was centred on participants who could be reached within a 3-day period in the Cardiff, Swansea and Glamorgan areas. The e-survey had the potential to widen the geographical and therefore institutional representation of viewpoints but the extent to which it did cannot be known as it was conducted anonymously. However, of the 22 out-of-office responses to the invitation email, one third came from institutions in north Wales, suggesting that the spread of views expressed was not as widely dispersed as might have been hoped.

6. Sample size and representativeness are important criteria against which to assess the merits of particular viewpoints, e.g. whether to give them prominence in the final analysis, but the richness of the views of a few or even one respondent cannot simply be ignored. It is also not appropriate to attach too much importance to such views as there is no way to know if a larger sample would have consolidated their isolation or yielded greater representation or even consensus for their views.
7. Another feature of small samples is that contradictory positions can be asserted but with no prospect of their being assessable in terms of relative credibility. Mostly, of course, such contradictions arise from different settings (institutions) with different conditions and as such should properly constitute a range of experiences rather than any generalizable and singular position.
8. For me, therefore, the value of any interview comments and questionnaire responses does not lie solely in their numerical strength but in how they helped me to think about the issues relating to WERN II and its objectives. More so than is perhaps usual, therefore, the conclusions I have arrived at in this evaluation are informed as much by the evidence available to me as by an interpretation informed by often singular insights and instances, informal conversations and my own participation in events.

## Sampling

### *Interviews*

9. Sampling for the evaluation interviews was constrained by short time frames, the time of year (July) and the practicalities of covering a wide geographical area within a short period in Wales. The sample of 17 interviewees offered a reasonable spread across the WERN II participation types. Telephone interviews were therefore not pursued after the first attempts to arrange them had not proven successful.
10. The interview schedule was designed along standard lines of inquiry into how participants perceived the success or otherwise of WERN II and specifically the aspects in which they were engaged. The interviews were conducted on a face-to-face and one-to-one basis with the exception of two people who were interviewed together.
11. The sample breakdown is set out in Table 1:

*Table 1: Sample of interviewees in WERN II (17 interviewees, 24 roles)*

	WERN II Role						
	Collaborative Fellow	Project Member	Project Leader	Mentor	Advisory Group Member	Executive Group Member	Government Representative
No.	3	5	4	2	4	4	2



*e-Survey*

12. The selection of recipients for the e-survey was based on the WERN administration lists and included all successful and unsuccessful applicants for funds, Executive and Advisory Group members, and mentors. The breakdown of the institutional backgrounds of the 98 recipients in the sample is given in Table 2 and 23 of these recipients completed the survey. Given that there were 22 email bounce backs, which could reasonably be ruled out of responding, the 23 responses represented 30% of the available sample.

*Table 2: Sample of institutional recipients for the e-survey*

	Institution												
	Aberystwyth	Bangor	Cardiff	Glamorgan	Glyndwr	Newport	Open Uni	Swansea U	Swansea Met	Trinity	UWIC	Other <sup>1</sup>	Total
<b>e-Survey Sample</b>	4	12	9	11	5	10	1	9	4	14	8	11	98

13. WERN II differed significantly from WERN I in a number of ways but primarily in the diversity of options for engagement. These included group bursaries for developing a proposal, group bursaries for specific small-scale studies, a collaborative local authority project and collaborative fellowships with mentors. In collaboration with the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), WERN II has also funded and developed a review of the implications for Wales of the outcomes from the TLRP projects.

14. The range of roles and responsibilities held by the e-survey respondents is set out in Table 3:

*Table 3: WERN II roles of e-survey respondents (23 respondents, 32 roles)*

	WERN II Role									
	Collaborative Fellow	Funded Bursary Group Member	Funded Bursary Group Leader	Unfunded Bursary Group Applicant	Advisory Group Member	Executive Group Member	Local Authority Project Member	Unfunded Local Authority Project Applicant	TLRP Associate Fellow	TLRP Reviewer
<b>No.</b>	5	3	5	2	3	8	2	1	2	1

15. Details of the number of applications and funded awards are set out in Table 4:

<sup>1</sup> Includes 8xAdvisory Group members, 2xlocal authority staff and 1xfreelancer

Table 4: Activities funded in WERN II

Type of WERN II Activity	No. of Applications	No. Funded	Funds Allocated
Group Bursary for Proposal Writing	5	3	£32,504
Group Bursary for a Small-scale Study	10	6 <sup>2</sup>	£24,944
Collaborative Fellowship	6	5	£11,250
Collaborative Research (Local Authority Project)	3	1	£38,741
TLRP Review Fellows and Reviewers	25	8 <sup>3</sup>	£10,000 <sup>4</sup>

## Overall perception of WERN II

16. The large majority of interviewees (15) viewed WERN II as a success though a variety of qualifications was also expressed. For example, two interviewees indicated that they knew little about WERN as an entity and measured success solely on personal participation and impact grounds. Several interviewees perceived WERN II as building on WERN I but differed in their interpretations of this. For example, the responses variously indicated that success related to it being a 'mopping' up exercise, picking up proposals that had not been supported in WERN I; a consolidation and extension of WERN I activities; a consolidation of the educational research community that WERN I had fostered; and a natural diversification of WERN I into new activities. One interviewee queried whether the extent of collaboration was less than in WERN I, another felt that an emphasis on school-phase education had marginalized other aspects of education and one suggested that the importance of capacity building (in terms of training courses etc) had been lost.

17. The report will now consider the objectives for WERN II in the light of the data and information collected.

### Objective 1: To develop clusters of inter-institutional research expertise in key areas of policy and practice for Wales

18. Applicants for WERN II awards were made aware that one of the criteria for funding was relevance to policy and practice in Wales and were advised that details of WAG priorities could be found in the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) Evidence Plan, which was available from the WERN Office. The range of funded topics is set out in Table 5 and confirms that a variety of important areas was addressed with a significant research effort clustering around early years education.

19. In terms of policy and practice, two of those interviewed were confident that aspects of WERN II work would eventually have impact and one of these was already preparing good practice guidance for practitioners. However, another two interviewees felt that WERN overall was too small in scale and investment to have any significant impact on the Welsh education system, while another felt that it had been too ambitious in relation to the level of investment made in it.

<sup>2</sup> One bursary award was cancelled owing to ill-health. The funds were returned

<sup>3</sup> Of these, four were joint appointments. In addition to the funded appointments there were six unfunded participants.

<sup>4</sup> There were four themes (see Table 5) each funded at £2,500

20. Outputs from research are a primary vehicle for impacting on policy and practice. However, given the short time-frame and the fact that many of the activities were not yet completed (indeed almost half of the final reports were not yet received at the time of the evaluation in mid-July), it is hardly surprising that the majority of outputs mentioned in reports, interview and e-survey responses were in the process of planning and preparation. The large majority of responses e.g. 11 of the 14 relevant e-survey comments, reported on plans in various stages of completion for grant bids, journal articles and international conference presentations. Nevertheless three grant proposals and a number of conference presentations were recorded, with several respondents confidently pointing to reports that in their view had potential to impact on Welsh local authorities and policy matters in higher education. One book proposal had been accepted and was nearing the submitted manuscript stage.

*Table 5: Range of topics covered by WERN II activities*

Type of WERN II Activity	Topics
Group Bursary for Proposal Writing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Leadership and management of music education in schools</li> <li>2. Adults and informal learning</li> <li>3. Well-being in the Foundation Phase</li> </ol>
Group Bursary for a Small-scale Study	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Partnerships in the rural community</li> <li>2. Gender and bullying in the nursery</li> <li>3. Interactive teaching and ICT</li> <li>4. Occupational change in FE and HE in post-devolution Wales</li> <li>5. Thinking skills in the Foundation Phase</li> </ol>
Collaborative Fellowship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Building thinking skills in thinking classrooms</li> <li>2. Training programme on research with young children</li> <li>3. ICT support for shared thinking in home and pre-school settings</li> <li>4. Training in educational research skills</li> <li>5. Leadership of large-scale inter-institutional projects</li> </ol>
Collaborative Research (Local Authority Project)	Increasing engagement between local authorities and higher education research
TLRP Review Fellows and Reviewers	Four themes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Foundation Phase</li> <li>2. Improving teaching for 7-14 year olds</li> <li>3. Improving learning by taking account of learners' perspectives</li> <li>4. Social inclusion</li> </ol>

21. The promotion of collaborative groups, i.e. clusters of researchers, was a feature of both phases of WERN and six interviewees commented on the extent of collaboration in WERN II compared to WERN I. Four of these considered that there was no significant degree of new collaboration; rather there were instances either of the same teams continuing work that had been established in WERN I or new activities involving members of existing WERN I networks. One respondent felt that there were less multi-institutional collaborations, as the limited planning and application time had favoured simpler pairings, and one collaborator had been identified simply to 'tick the box' in the award requirements.

22. The suggestion of a reduced level of collaboration is borne out in tables 6 and 7<sup>5</sup> though some positive qualification of this is needed when inter-institutional mentoring relationships are factored in.

<sup>5</sup> Tables 6 and 7 do not include mentor relationships and collaborative fellowships

*Table 6: Summary of collaborative relationships between institutions in funded WERN II activities*

	Institution											
	Aberystwyth	Bangor	Cardiff	Glamorgan	Glyndwr	Newport	Open U	Swansea U	Swansea Met	Trinity	UWIC	Average
Collaborative Relationships 2008-09	1	2	3	3	0	3	0	3	1	2	2	2.2
Collaborative Relationships 2007-08	1	3	2	4	0	3	0	3	2	4	4	2.9

*Table 7: Number of collaborative relationships involved in funded WERN II activities*

	No. of Collaborating Institutions		
	2	3	4
<b>No. of Awards 2008-09<sup>6</sup></b>	6	2	0
<b>No. of Awards 2007-08</b>	3	3	2

**Objective2: To develop, using a social practices model of professional learning, the research expertise and experience of individual researchers**

23. There can be little doubt from their reports that the collaborative fellowships were particularly successful in promoting the professional learning of those involved. The quality of the support from the mentors was unanimously appreciated and praised, with a variety of outputs and opportunities (off-campus meetings, conference attendance, collaborative writing, 1-to-1 training and so on) spinning off what was a relatively modest amount of funding (£2,250 per fellowship).

24. In addition to project and fellowship reports, comments from the interviewees and respondents to the e-survey identified a wide range of professional development benefits from their participation in WERN II. Skills featured frequently in these responses and fell into such predictable categories as research methods (e.g., interviewing, questionnaire design, research with young children and research in a school context); communication (e.g. video conferencing and conference presentations); organizational (e.g. time management, project leadership and event organization) and personal/interpersonal (e.g. working in a team and working with colleagues from other institutions).

25. For one person, WERN II was the vehicle for the new concept, to them, of educational research while for another three it afforded an introduction to a new sector of education. Perhaps surprisingly, only three respondents mentioned having had the opportunity to

<sup>6</sup> One award, not recorded in the table, did not have two collaborating institutions but the mentor involved was from another institution

explore different research methods or theoretical perspectives as part of their own professional development, though two others did comment on the benefits of having the opportunity to update themselves in specific areas of literature. Five of the respondents highlighted the value of WERN II in enabling them to develop new links with colleagues in other institutions and organizations, particularly with established academics in their field and including, in one instance, international collaborations.

26. Individual comments recorded the professional development benefits of working with experts in the field, a raised awareness of Welsh language issues and the opportunity to inform teaching directly from research.

### **Objective 3: To develop awareness amongst institutional managers of the importance of creating or further developing a research culture in their institution**

#### *Institutional impacts*

27. In relation to a perceived impact on Welsh institutions, half of those interviewed (8/16) commended WERN II for continuing to raise the profile of educational research and capacity building. One person commented specifically on the importance of this for institutions dominated by teacher education programmes. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most frequent response to an item on institutional impact in the e-survey (13/21) was to commend the institutional links and collaborations that had been promoted through WERN II, though one respondent expressed the view that this was less so than in WERN I (a point confirmed in tables 6 and 7 above). Seven interviewees also hailed the impact of increased collaboration between their institution and others, and between colleagues internally. Five others spoke of the raised awareness of the importance and breadth of educational research in their institutions, with various indicators such as staff taking up doctoral study (two institutions), the initiation of a 'research day', the impact of dissemination of WERN-based research findings on teaching, and discussions on the interface between research and practice at management level.
28. WERN II income was reported to have been an important element in one institution while, in another, the engagement with WERN II had assisted in early planning for the REF<sup>7</sup>. One person stated that their institution had shown no signs of valuing research while another, with an overview of several aspects of WERN, argued that some institutions remained unready to adopt a role in educational research despite WERN and the efforts of some of their staff members.
29. Four e-survey respondents indicated that there was little or no evidence of institutional impact, or as one put it " ... *this is more a question of faith than evidence*". Four others commented that their institutions had begun to take notice of the strengths and weaknesses of educational research in their institutional profiles and that of Wales more generally. Support for capacity building was in evidence in these cases though one respondent was concerned about a perceived tendency to " ... *reinforce the individualistic culture of research both at the level of individual academics and at the level of individual institutions*".
30. When asked to comment on any wider 'human capital' outcomes from WERN II, all but one (14/15) of the relevant e-survey responses confirmed that within their own institutions there had been a catalytic effect on colleagues who had not previously been engaged in research. Comments referred to increased awareness and discourse on research, several instances of doctoral studies being taken up, new skills being

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<sup>7</sup> REF is the Research Excellence Framework that is planned to replace the Research Assessment Exercise, RAE - <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/ref/>

developed, increased confidence in research contexts and more general research-related activities such as seminars. Two alluded specifically to the benefits for new and 'younger' members of staff. One respondent considered the time-frame to be too short to be effective. While the sentiments were overwhelmingly positive in relation to this issue, one more sanguine respondent observed that many staff had remained untouched by the initiative and that there was a sense " ... *towards the end of more applications from the same people* [as in WERN I]". Analysis shows that this impression is only partially warranted with 16 of the 41 members of successful applications having been in WERN I bursary groups.

### *Institutional managers*

31. Vice-chancellors and the senior management of higher education institutions were viewed by many as the key influencers in achieving a better research-teaching interface in institutions, particularly in facilitating existing or nascent research cultures through the provision of time and staff resources. Two interviewees felt that part of the answer lay with individual members of staff being convinced that engagement with research at some level was a pre-requisite for improving practice and educational outcomes. The e-survey addressed the notion of research culture more directly with the following item:

Please comment on the statement: *Every institution engaged in any phase of education (e.g. teacher education, early years, schools, post-compulsory, informal education etc) should promote a culture of research in education*

32. Not surprisingly, this item prompted a variety of thoughtful comments, all (23/23) in broad support of the notion. However, respondents were careful to offer distinctions between engagement in research and engagement with research. As one respondent expressed it:

*There is a continuum from reflective practice and evaluating one's everyday activities to being very involved in REF type research, and individuals will find themselves on different points on this continuum. Individuals should be encouraged to move along this continuum to develop more research, but how much this is possible will vary according to skills and personal preference.*

33. The sentiments of another respondent reflected similar issues but focused on the need for teacher educators to be 'research literate':

*I do not think it is necessary for teacher educators to be social scientists in order for them to be brilliant at educating the future teaching workforce. But I do think it is necessary for them to be 'research literate' and have a scholarly approach to the strengths and limits of research evidence.*

34. The requirement to use research to support reflection on one's own practice (in its 'keeping up with the literature' rather than 'carrying out a project' meaning) was mentioned by three respondents. However, seven explicitly made the case for active engagement in research, though with some qualifications e.g. " ... *all educational activity will be based on "finding out" at some level - systematic, high -level academic inquiry based on the existing body of theory and practice is necessarily going to be restricted.*" Two respondents agreed with the overall premise but argued that funding to make time available for research activity was a prerequisite. Five respondents framed their responses around the need for institutions dominated by teacher education programmes to recognize the benefits of research-informed teacher education and to ring changes in their workload policies and general disposition to research activity. Two of these people, from different teaching-intensive institutions, qualified their views by arguing that it was also important to ensure that time for teaching and administrative activities did not expand inefficiently, inadvertently curtailing time for scholarship and research.



#### **Objective 4: To grow and sustain a community of educational researchers in Wales**

35. For some ten years or more, educational research in Wales has experienced a serious decline culminating in a poor outcome across the sector in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (see Appendix 1). It was in view of the seriousness of the continuing decline that WERN was launched as an attempt to pump-prime new developments in research. WERN made bursary awards available to all higher education institutions in Wales through a competitive bidding process.
36. In the first phase of WERN (2007-08) there were 93 individuals who participated in bids for these awards. Cross-checking these with the list of 2008-09 applicants revealed that some 63% (59) did not make applications to WERN II. Of the 98<sup>8</sup> individuals bidding for participation in all of the aspects of WERN II (bursary groups, local authority project, TLRP review and collaborative fellowships), some 60% (60) had made applications to the WERN scheme for the first time. This suggests that the two phases of WERN had engaged some 150 academic staff in funded research activities (not counting the considerable voluntary inputs of Executive and Advisory group members, the unfunded mentors and voluntary TLRP reviewers). The extent to which this constitutes a community of research is more problematic of course and there seems every possibility that for a large proportion of the 115 or so people who were involved only once in the course of the two phases, it had been a process of 'dipping a toe' rather than developing or extending active research profiles.
37. Almost every institution had members of staff participating in WERN II in one or more of the funded activities and the distribution is set out in Table 8. In the main, the bursary group activities built on work that had been initiated in WERN I, though it should be emphasized that some of these activities had been prompted by existing research strengths. For example the rural education, 'working lives', ICT and Foundation Stage topics had strong links to previous work and, indeed, were proposed by members of WERN I groups. Although the large majority of those who were unsuccessful in WERN I did not make another application, two of the WERN II awards – relating to music education and bullying in the early years – had been successfully re-worked from WERN I applications.

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<sup>8</sup> Considerable care has been taken to ensure these figures are accurate but it is possible that a small number of individuals may have been double-counted or missed. I would estimate that this is of the order of 2-3 people in the overall total of 98, implying a possible error of (+/-) 2%.



Table 8: Summary of participation in WERN II activities

	Institution												
	Aberystwyth	Bangor	Cardiff	Glamorgan	Glyndwr	Newport	Open U	Swansea U	Swansea Met	Trinity	UWIC	Other <sup>9</sup>	Total <sup>10</sup>
Bursary Group Members	3	3	3 <sup>11</sup>	6		2		5	2	3	8 <sup>12</sup>	1	36
Bursary Group Leaders	1	1	1 <sup>13</sup>	1				1		1	2 <sup>14</sup>		8
Collaborative Fellows		1						1		2 <sup>15</sup>	1		5
Local Authority Project Members	1		2										3
TLRP Associate Research Fellows		1		1				1	1	1	1	0	6 <sup>16</sup>
TLRP Research Reviewers (Funded)						2							2
TLRP Research Reviewers (Voluntary)		1		1				2		1	1		6
Mentors			4					2				4 <sup>17</sup>	10

38. A positive community dimension was mentioned by three interviewees with one identifying the WERN II Colloquium as a particular indicator of this success. Five interviewees also spoke of a community of educational researchers having been consolidated by the second phase of WERN with two mentioning reduced 'suspicion' and the improved relationships brought about by the collaboration of research-intensive and non-research-intensive institutions. In a poignant comment related to this, however, one interviewee reported feeling that their personal presence in WERN activities often seemed to be over-shadowed by other participants' perceptions of their institution.

<sup>9</sup> Includes 8x Advisory Group members, 2x local authority staff and 1x freelancer

<sup>10</sup> The total of participants active in funded activities was 52, reducing to 47 individuals when double roles and joint appointments are taken into account. There were 41 individuals (not doubled up) participating in the funded bursary groups, local authority project and collaborative fellowships

<sup>11</sup> One of these participants was a member of two bursary groups

<sup>12</sup> One of these participants was a member of two bursary groups

<sup>13</sup> An additional project was cancelled owing to ill health

<sup>14</sup> This was one participant who led two bursary groups

<sup>15</sup> One of these participants was also a bursary group leader

<sup>16</sup> Four of these participants shared the role in two pairs

<sup>17</sup> From institutions outside Wales

**Objective 5: To sponsor research that builds engagement between research and policy/practice communities and that may have the potential to stimulate future research partnerships**

39. WERN II sponsored one medium-sized research project, seeking applications for a collaborative study involving local authorities. Three applications were received and one was funded. The project was completed on time but has not yet been independently or internally (WERN) evaluated. However, from all available accounts it appears to have been a success with much potential to influence future policy and to promote future research collaborations.
40. The final two objectives involve operational and governance aspects of WERN II and will be considered together below.

**Objective 6: To create and maintain mechanisms to support research and take-up of WERN funding opportunities**

**Objective 7: To maintain collaboration between institutional partners by a democratic and accountable governance structure**

41. Based on the variety of formal and informal sources of information, there is no doubt that the WERN Executive Group successfully achieved these two objectives. The focus on inter-institutional collaboration, in developing research capacity and encouraging the take-up of the various opportunities available, was clear from the minutes. It was also clear in the minutes that the Executive Group's attention to the detail of its responsibilities and a concern to provide a platform for contributions from all of its members was exemplary. As a collaborative forum comprising representatives from every institution, the Executive Group was widely acknowledged to have played a major role in ensuring the success and cohesion of WERN II. There are certainly grounds for recommending that future capacity building efforts should retain the same type of forum and cooperative processes.
42. A relatively small number of counter-views about the Executive Group were expressed in interviews and in the e-survey but these tended to relate to the working processes and functions of the Group rather than the principle of a collaborative forum or network. As discussed earlier, there is no means of establishing the extent to which such views might be isolated or consensual, or indeed how legitimate they might be, but common sense would suggest that nothing can be perfect and some negative criticism has to be expected.
43. Critical views therefore included one participant perceiving the Group's work to be unfocused and rambling, slow in the making of decisions and rarely strategic. In the minutes, there is an element of focusing on operational and institutional interests rather than strategic, and a degree of repetition in its business. However, to some extent in a complex and busy enterprise, operational focusing should be expected while institutional focusing was part of the Group's remit. In a potentially contradictory comment, another respondent took the view that that the Group was too democratic and not sufficiently focused on the pursuit of quality. Although recognizing the need for objectivity, a third respondent pointed to a perceived contradiction in 'executive' and 'advisory' roles, suggesting that the Executive Group was not able to deliver on the central goal of involving all institutions in WERN-funded research as the authority to disburse funds was vested in the Advisory Group. Another respondent also expressed frustration at the group privileging "... *collaboration for its own sake without sufficient emphasis on the outputs of any collaboration*". One respondent suggested that the working of the Executive Group could be improved by having the chair rotate among the institutions.

44. The Advisory Group drew widespread praise for its expertise and selfless contributions of time and effort to the cause of reviving educational research in Wales. It was widely regarded as fair in its evaluations of proposals but there were a small number of counter-views. For example, two respondents criticised the perceived lack of transparency and fairness in disbursing funds, in one case also questioning the Group's competence in the field of a proposal that had been rejected despite, in the proposer's view, being well-worked and supported by an expert mentor.
45. The second phase of WERN had introduced a process offering mentor support during the application process. However, there was a relatively low uptake of this facility. When asked to comment on this, half (9/18) of the e-survey respondents suggested that logistical difficulties such as lack of time and large distances had hampered organization and attendance at meetings. Small numbers speculated on applicants feeling vulnerable about being exposed to critical evaluation from senior academics in other institutions (2), or viewing mentor support as unnecessary either through a lack of appreciation of the benefits of mentor feedback (3) or believing they had sufficient expertise in their groups (3). Suggestions for improvement included enabling the mentoring support as a second stage process after an initial draft application or making mentor input a requirement of the application process. Four respondents did avail of mentor support in the application process, two without commenting further on it, one commending it and one ruling the fact that the collective expertise did not result in a successful application. One respondent reported not knowing what support was available.
46. When asked how WERN II might have been altered to improve the benefits for individuals and institutions the most frequent comment related to the need to have increased time built into the programme. However, as Table 9 illustrates, opinion was divided in the e-survey on whether there was sufficient time built into the programme for making applications. Two of those interviewed felt that their institutions did not facilitate the planned time commitments but one reported that their WERN-related institutional arrangements could not have been improved as they had worked very well. As Table 9 shows, most of the e-survey respondents felt that the WERN II application process was clearly outlined but almost equal numbers contested the view that WERN II was sufficiently funded.

*Table 9: Project application process*

Survey Statement	Agree % (n)	No view % (n)	Disagree % (n)	No. of Responses
The time for making an application was insufficient	50 (11)	14 (3)	36 (8)	22
The process was clearly outlined	73 (16)	18 (4)	9 (2)	22
The funding was sufficient	36 (8)	23 (5)	41 (9)	22

#### *The future of educational research in Wales*

47. In terms of the prospects of sustaining the gains made in WERN II, there was some confidence that individuals would maintain their research interests and skills (mentioned by five interviewees) and that contacts initiated by both phases of WERN would endure (mentioned by three). One person felt that the confidence generated around educational research by WERN would last beyond the end of the programme. However, two interviewees felt there would be little sustained impact on institutions owing to the limited period of operation of WERN and a lack of institutional commitment respectively. Another

two felt that in a post-WERN situation the inter-institutional networks created would be less likely to survive than single institution groupings.

48. A number of interviewees (5) looked to HEFCW and WAG investment to sustain the momentum and growth of an educational research community, and specifically the networking and collaborative ventures. One commented that WERN had fostered a better understanding of educational research and capacity building issues across the system, including HEFCW and WAG, while another felt that sustained growth would only follow a greater realization among institutions that teacher education and other education-related programmes can be improved through a stronger relationship with research.
49. The e-survey also sought views on aspects of the future situation and the results are presented in Table 10 below. There was a notable ambivalence about the value of WERN as a “... *solid platform of experience of the bidding process for institutional teams and inter-institutional networks to create good proposals in the future*” with as many respondents agreeing as expressing uncertainty. However, only a small minority disagreed outright with the proposition.
50. Relatively high majorities of the respondents felt that in any future development:
- Funds for researchers and doctoral students should be distributed across institutions;
  - Research should not simply be focused on Wales-related issues;
  - Institutional benefits must be clear and tangible to ensure the full commitment of institutional managers;
  - High quality research will be the best foundation for capacity building in Wales;
  - Opportunities must be open for all institutions;
  - Funding sources from across Wales and beyond must be actively pursued.

Table 10: Comments on the future of educational research in Wales

Survey Statement	Agree % (n)	No view/Not Sure % (n)	Disagree % (n)	No. of Responses
WERN II has provided a solid platform of experience of the bidding process for institutional teams and inter-institutional networks to create good proposals in the future	44 (10)	48 (11)	9 (2)	23
Future developments should aim to ensure that funded researchers, doctoral students etc are appropriately based across institutions	74 (17)	22 (5)	4 (1)	23
Future educational research in Wales must be broadly-based and not simply focused on Wales-related issues	77 (17)	23 (5)	0	22
Institutional benefits from educational research activities in the future must be clear and tangible to ensure the full engagement and commitment of institutional managers	70 (16)	26 (6)	4 (1)	23
High quality research will be the best foundation for developing educational research capacity in Wales	87 (20)	4 (1)	9 (2)	23
There will always be differences in both volume and quality educational research outputs from institutions in Wales but opportunities must be open for all	96 (21)	5 (1)	0	22
WERN or any successor must actively pursue funding sources from across Wales and beyond	100 (23)	0	0	23

## Conclusions

51. All things considered I feel confident that the various sources of data and information in this evaluation have provided me with a sufficient grasp of the issues to enable me tentatively to propose a set of conclusions.
52. It is clear to me, for example, that it would be a major mistake to allow the gains in collaboration, capacity building and awareness of the importance of research to improving education and teacher education, made through WERN activities, simply to fade away. That said, it is not an easy matter to identify how best to sustain and further develop these gains. But at least one thing is crystal clear, that responsibility for developing and improving the educational research base in Wales cannot simply be laid at any one group's door.
53. There are, instead, implications for every group that has the potential to be involved in educational research – as users of the research, as funders and as researchers themselves. I set out my views on these implications below but first I should like to rehearse several points on which, in my view, there is general consensus within the WERN community. These are:
- Educational research is a principal means for promoting improvement and positive change in education in all sectors.
  - Without an appropriate level of research activity, designed to increase understanding of how education can be improved at the system, social and individual levels *within its own context*, any nation risks an unhealthy stasis in the quality of educational experience and outcomes for all of its citizens.

- Educational research is valuable across a spectrum of levels.

At one end, for example, existing research-based knowledge and literature can be used continuously to inform and promote improvements in practice at the level of practitioners and their institutions, schools or workplaces.

At the other end, research of the highest quality carried out locally can contribute both to significant changes in national policy and practice and to global knowledge building.

- Wales has the potential to increase its contribution to UK and international research excellence and to this end it needs a highly skilled community of educational researchers.

54. The evaluation of WERN has shown that:

- It is possible, at a relatively modest level of funding, to generate increased awareness of the importance of educational research and to promote research capacity building and collaborative research activity across institutions that may differ significantly in mission (e.g. institutions that focus on different aspects or sectors of education, or which are either predominantly teaching or research-intensive).
- There is a viable and growing core of research expertise in a number of specific policy and practice areas, for example post-compulsory and adult education, rural education, ICT in education and early years education.
- Despite involvement in WERN, some teaching and/or teacher education-intensive institutions appear not yet to have espoused and facilitated, at an institutional level, the development of a research-informed or research-active culture for improvement.
- WERN, as a pan-Wales forum for inter-institutional representation and engagement on educational research matters, has brought considerable benefits to institutions and individual researchers, and the overall well-being of educational research in Wales.

#### *Implications of WERN II for stakeholders*

55. Continuing on from its first phase, WERN II has in my view brought increased focus to the implications for all stakeholders in educational research. The statements that follow are generalized to all members of each stakeholder community but I should like to emphasize that I do recognize there are those who need to consider the advice and those who already espouse and act upon the ideas or good practices involved.

- For government there is a need to provide a strategic lead in defining the nation's educational research needs, to sponsor competitive research funding programmes and to challenge institutions to develop their use of and engagement in research.

Action in these areas can be considerably strengthened by a purposeful liaison with institutional representatives, e.g. in some form of WERN-like forum, in the planning and outworking of any strategy or programme.

- For managers in higher education institutions there is a need to evaluate their institutional investment in educational research and its potential to improve their programmes.

They need to consolidate any strengths and address any weaknesses in their educational research activities. Where appropriate, they must consider how best to address the workload implications of improving the teaching-research interface.

There is also a need to be pro-active in liaising with government and other potential research users to identify strategic developments and needs in educational research.

- For individual academics there is the need to recognize that they must engage with or in educational research if its potential to improve their practice and their students' learning outcomes is to be realized.

In teaching intensive contexts specifically, including teacher education, there is a need to ensure that the personal management of teaching and administration is optimized in order to facilitate engagement with or in educational research.

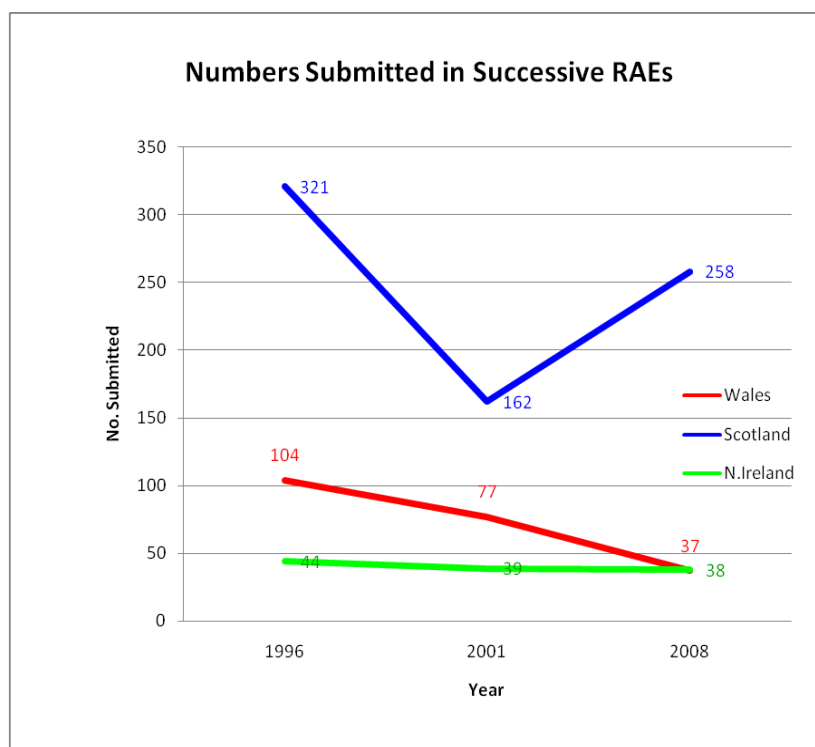


## Appendix 1

### RAE Context

Underpinning the rationale for WERN, since its inception, is the attempt to address the decline in educational research capacity across the country and within the higher education institutions in recent years. During WERN II, the results of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) were announced and these spelled out the degree of collapse over the previous seven years with numbers of active researchers being submitted to the Education assessment panel falling from 77 to 37<sup>18</sup> since the last RAE in 2001. Figure 1 illustrates this decline in comparison to re-growth in Scotland and a relatively steady state in Northern Ireland over the same period.

*Figure 1: Comparison of numbers of active researchers submitted to the Education panel of the RAE (2008) for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.*



<sup>18</sup> The extent of this decline must be tempered with the knowledge that Cardiff University did not make a submission to the Education panel.