



## **SFRE Forum I**

### **Stimulus Report: Northern Ireland**

***October 2008***



# **Capacity and Quality in Education Research in Northern Ireland**

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

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## A. Preface and acknowledgements

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## B. Executive summary

Northern Ireland differs considerably from the other three jurisdictions of the United Kingdom by virtue of it being very small (a population of circa 1.7 million), a fact that creates systemic difficulties such as capacity weaknesses in both numbers of researchers and the range of research skills available. Perhaps most importantly, Northern Ireland is uniquely distinguished from England, Scotland and Wales by having a proportionately large selective education system (grammar and non-selective secondary schools) and a religiously divided population. In combination with such national pressures as the RAE, these contextual features result in a largely instrumental role for educational research – a tool to gauge what policy changes are deliverable. In recent years, a strategic direction based on a dialogue between the government and the research community has therefore been needed to prevent the continuation of a perceived ad hoc and fragmented system of educational research. The challenges of building a thriving research community in such circumstances also include the need to promote innovative ideas and related research, and to encourage greater collaboration between institutions. This in turn will help to create a community of practice capable of both sustaining itself in the future and making available a broader range of research competence.

Education in Northern Ireland faces many challenges over the next decade, including pressures for rationalization of school provision, broader entitlement for children and young people, improved teaching, learning and assessment, effective school leadership, sound financial management, the achievement of greater social equality and inclusion and higher levels of attainment. In order to meet these expectations there is a need to enhance the research agenda on many aspects of education around strategic priorities.

The implementation of the Review of Public Administration<sup>10</sup> (RPA) sees the radical restructuring of the public sector here, including the education system. Monitoring, advice, research and inspection will have a key role in supporting the RPA changes. Specifically the Department of Education (DE) in its new role with the Education Skills Authority (ESA) will be required to focus on the use of “up-to-date, authoritative information... to determine its strategic priorities, to set standards and to fulfil its accountability responsibilities”<sup>11</sup> and the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) is similarly committed to a Research Agenda (2007-2009).

Circumstances are therefore changing in Northern Ireland augured by a number of recent developments (e.g. the recently constituted Education Research Forum for Northern Ireland and a number of research capacity building initiatives such as those supported by ESRC/TLRP and the imminent ESRC Placement Fellowship Scheme). Thus, the climate is set for increased discourse across the sector and the Strategic

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<sup>10</sup> The Review of Public Administration (RPA) represents the single largest set of changes to public administration in Northern Ireland in over 30 years. It is an opportunity to revitalize public services in Northern Ireland, making a public sector that is more accountable and encouraging working together with a common purpose to meet the needs of the community. In order to achieve this it has been proposed that the number of public bodies is reduced by 51 per cent from 154 to 76, with functions transferring to existing or new organizations (Goldblatt McGuigan, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland, Further Consultation (March 2005).

Forum for Research in Education (SFRE) project is set to make a substantial contribution to this process. And while much remains to be done in the longer term, the situation could arguably be improved by considering the benefits of developing a multi-disciplinary centre of research excellence guided by a broadly-based, strategic, stakeholder forum.

## C. Main Report

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide background information and context for educational research in Northern Ireland, with specific reference to research quality and capacity. Whilst the Report has been commissioned as part of a four nations exercise and as a stimulus to a forthcoming SFRE conference, the main aim is to encourage debate and discussion within the wider Northern Ireland education sector.

There are presently two Northern Ireland departments covering education - the Department of Education [DE], responsible for schools, and the Department for Employment and Learning [DEL], responsible for third level education, training and a range of employment-related matters. Alongside these, in the coming period, an Education and Skills Authority (ESA) is being established. This will have transferred to it the staff, functions and assets from the five existing Education and Library Boards<sup>12</sup> and their Regional Training Unit (which provides leadership training for teachers and principals), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)<sup>13</sup>, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)<sup>14</sup> and the functions of the current Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)<sup>15</sup>. Some DE staff will also be transferring to ESA. The intention is for ESA to be operational by April 2009 at the latest.

Gardner and Gallagher (2007) contextualize the influences on educational research of Northern Ireland's political and economic circumstances and how these shape its direction, nature and purpose. For instance, Northern Ireland is a society in transition, emerging from a prolonged period of conflict and political instability.

In the absence of a local administration from 1972 to 2007 (apart from a brief, unsuccessful attempt at devolved government during 2000-2002), during the prolonged period of direct rule by Westminster, three main consequences had an adverse impact of the development of educational research policy and development.

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<sup>12</sup> There are five education and library boards (ELBs) in Northern Ireland and these were established in 1973 following a reorganisation of local government. Each carries responsibility for providing, supporting and developing education in schools, library and youth services.

<sup>13</sup> The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) is the advocate for the Catholic Maintained Schools sector in Northern Ireland. Established under the auspices of 1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order, the Council's primary purpose is the provision of an upper tier of management for the Catholic Maintained Sector. CCMS represents trustees, schools and governors on issues such as raising and maintaining standards, the school estate and teacher employment. It is the largest employer of teachers in Northern Ireland (8500 teachers).

<sup>14</sup> The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) was established in 1987, its role is to co-ordinate efforts to develop Integrated Education and to assist parent groups in opening new integrated schools.

<sup>15</sup> The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA), as its name suggests, has responsibility for the Northern Ireland curriculum and the assessment and examination arrangements associated with it. CCEA was established as a state body in 1994 and is based in Belfast. It replaced the Northern Ireland Schools Examination and Assessment Council and the Northern Ireland Schools Examination Council.

Firstly, there has been a perception among many people in Northern Ireland that the Civil Service enjoyed too much autonomy in the determination of policy, especially in situations where a direct rule Minister either had little interest in education or was so focused on other aspects of their portfolio that education suffered a detriment. The significant expenditure on consultancy services as opposed to strategic research is an illustration of this.

Secondly, there have been numerous examples of policy decisions resulting from developments in England being applied (inappropriately) to Northern Ireland, whether these represented a good fit or not. A case in point was the Education Order (1989) derived from the 1988 Education Act where measures designed for a comprehensive education system in England were applied largely unmodified to the selective system in Northern Ireland.

Thirdly, local politicians had become accustomed to having little direct influence on the levers of power or decision-making and, as a result, often took up relatively superficial, populist positions on policy debates, without relying on any research evidence base, for example, regarding education.

Devolution was reintroduced in May 2007 with the election of an Executive Assembly comprising twelve Ministers. Devolution has resulted in significant differences in the political and legal landscape from the rest of the United Kingdom, notably regarding education. As reported by Smith (1999), a distinctive characteristic of the education system in Northern Ireland is segregation. The system is segregated:

- by religion in that most children (95 per cent) attend predominantly Protestant ('controlled') schools or Catholic ('maintained') schools, both effectively funded by the state. The integrated schools (those attended by both Protestant and Catholic children in a minimum 70/30 ratio) covers only around 5 per cent of the total school population (McGlynn, 2005).
- by ability (and some would argue social background) in that a selection system still operates at age 11 to decide which children attend grammar schools<sup>16</sup> (more than one third of children in second level education attend grammar schools).
- often by gender (particularly in second level education where a quarter of the secondary schools and almost half of all grammar schools are single sex).

Additionally, there are differences relating to such matters as the abolition of school league tables; the maintenance of a post-primary grammar/secondary selective system; divisions between controlled, maintained and integrated schools; its own curriculum with particular elements specific to Northern Ireland including citizenship education to foster mutual respect and understanding between Catholics and Protestants.

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<sup>16</sup> The education Minister in Northern Ireland announced plans in 2002 to end academic selection and the new minister intends to bring forward legislation following public consultation and a vote in the Assembly (DE press release, May 2008).

Structurally, a far-reaching Review of Public Administration (RPA) (initiated in 2002) affects all aspects of the administration of the region (health, social services, environment and education, etc.). The proposed reforms to the education system are complex and wide-ranging and are arguably the most complex element of the entire RPA programme. The RPA heralds major changes throughout the education sector, streamlining structures and redefining relationships, creating a new and fundamentally different approach to the way education is administered in Northern Ireland.

The central focus of the proposed model for the RPA in education is on raising quality. This will be through the creation of a better co-ordinated single policy administrative and planning framework that fosters and supports schools of different sectors and ethos, as the main drivers of educational improvement. The aim is to enable them to achieve greater autonomy and assume enhanced responsibility for raising standards of teaching and learning. This will be complemented and enhanced by high quality youth work. Following the implementation of the Review, the intention is that there will be a clear separation between policy formulation and operational delivery.

The Department of Education (DE), for example, will undergo significant internal changes in order to enable it to focus on strategy and policy, and set priorities and standards for the ESA, schools and youth services. While DE will delegate operational functions to the ESA, it will remain ultimately responsible for assuring the quality and standards of the services provided under its policies. Monitoring, advice, research and inspection will have a key role in supporting the RPA changes. DE is charged with establishing the strategic direction for education; and in so doing, it will be required to focus on the use of “up-to-date, authoritative information... to determine its strategic priorities, to set standards and to fulfil its accountability responsibilities.”<sup>17</sup>

While the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) remains largely unaffected by the RPA, it will nevertheless work closely with DE to agree the responsibilities of ESA in relation to the 14-19 year agenda as well as its wider links with teacher training and further and higher education generally. Within its corporate plan ([www.delni.gov.uk/corporate\\_plan\\_05-08.pdf](http://www.delni.gov.uk/corporate_plan_05-08.pdf)) DEL recognises that ‘access to high quality, up to date research is an essential ingredient in both shaping and delivering successfully upon its strategic priorities’ (p.4) and to this effect issued its first Research Agenda (DEL, 2004) followed more recently by its Research Agenda 2007-2009. These set out a number of ‘high level areas’, some of which have already been delivered, where DEL wish to strengthen the evidence base in order to consolidate the link between evidence and policy development.

There are several considerations regarding the establishment and development of a strategic educational research plan, viz:

- The political and legal distinctiveness of the region increases the need for coordinated and specialist research - expert knowledge of the region.

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<sup>17</sup> The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland, Further Consultation (March 2005)

- There is significant potential to capitalise upon this distinctiveness in terms of developing research of local (and also national and international) significance on a variety of issues – including education and conflict, education in deeply-divided societies, education and equity and social justice – all of which relate to diversity and difference in education.

There are two aspects of the broader economic environment that have implications for the establishment and development of a research strategy for education in Northern Ireland:

- At a regional level there has been a relatively stable demand for research and consultancy work in the area of education and training, the amount invested has been relatively low. My own estimates in 2005 suggested that about £700,000 is spent on commissioning educational research in Northern Ireland per year by key departments and agencies within Northern Ireland. However, this can only be regarded as a ‘guesstimate’ for three reasons:
  - total expenditure has fluctuated significantly year by year depending upon the strategic priorities of particular departments or agencies.
  - total expenditure is restricted to those departments and agencies based within Northern Ireland with dedicated budgets to spend on educational research here. Considerable research funding is available from GB/European/global bodies (i.e. ESRC, Nuffield, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and especially Atlantic Philanthropies etc.).
  - alongside these more stable revenue streams there is also a relatively large voluntary sector funded particularly through Europe both in terms of Northern Ireland’s transitional Objective 1 status and also its unique qualification for funding from successive PEACE programmes where independent evaluations are often a requirement of their funding.
- In contrast, funding opportunities at a national level have become more competitive and limited both in terms of the increasing concentration of government funding for research in higher education in relation to a smaller number of research-intensive universities as well as the introduction from 2005 of full economic costing by all UK universities.

Regarding the RPA there is also little indication yet as to how and in what way new funding arrangements will be made available for research e.g. through the new Research and Development section of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA).

Education in Northern Ireland faces many challenges over the next decade. It is a period of transition and educational restructuring and with this comes uncertainty. Specific challenges include pressures for rationalization of school provision, greater collaboration, broader entitlement, improved teaching, learning and assessment,

effective school leadership, sound financial management, ways of achieving greater social equality and inclusion and higher levels of attainment. In order to meet these expectations there is a need to enhance the research agenda and increase the evidence base on many aspects of education around strategic priorities (for example, with regard to schooling: a Shared Future, the Entitlement Framework; the revised Curriculum; Early Years' Literacy; effective assessment; school democracy and citizenship; employability and enterprise; and with regard to post-compulsory, its strategic priorities comprise outcomes and labour market success information for further education students and trainees, an update on adult numeracy and literacy skill levels; economic engagement between further education and employers; variable tuition fees in higher education and the Youth Cohort Study etc.).



## 2. The context of education research in Northern Ireland

### 2.1. Provision

In terms of the evolution of disciplinary traditions in educational research in Northern Ireland the social sciences, particularly psychology, have predominated. In recent years, these have given way to more collaborative, inter-disciplinary research approaches ranging from sociological/ethnographic inquiries through to studies requiring increased capacity to handle large data sets, statistical modelling and randomized controlled trials. Research capacity still tends to reside in a small percentage of the education community although there are increasing efforts to reduce this imbalance through a variety of initiatives.

Historically, NICER (the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research) set the scene. It was formed in the 1970s to provide a forum for educational interests. NICER's research activity was funded by the Department of Education (DE) but in 1994, the government ceased funding NICER and the staff and its commitments were transferred to the School of Education at Queen's University, Belfast. From this point onwards, DE's budget for educational research was used to fund targeted projects which would inform departmental policy and which were open to academics (and others) through a competitive application process. From 1996, this process generated a range of research projects which in recent years have been disseminated through the DE portal ([http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32\\_statistics\\_and\\_research-research\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32statisticsandresearch_pg/32_statistics_and_research-research_pg.htm)). The majority of these projects have focused on issues across the schools sectors and have involved surveys, evaluations, case studies, baseline analyses, identification of good practice on such issues as alternative education provision, teacher retention, teacher professional development, personal education, literacy and numeracy, Traveller education etc. Further DE resources have been deployed annually to support large scale projects by researchers from outside the jurisdiction such as the NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research) Cohort Study and EPPI which often led to limited opportunities for tendering from the local HEIs and this has been a source of contention.

In the main, educational research in Northern Ireland is carried out by:

- academics;
- the voluntary/community sector;
- private consultancies;
- government departments;
- practitioners; and
- independents.

**Table 1: Summary of the main forms of education and educational research undertaken**

RESEARCH CARRIED OUT BY.....	NATURE OF RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN
Academics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 'Blue-skies' thinking</li> <li>▪ Multi-disciplinary</li> <li>▪ Contributing to knowledge</li> <li>▪ Qualitative/ethnographic</li> <li>▪ Creative approaches</li> <li>▪ Meta-analyses</li> <li>▪ Research largely determined by funders and tender specifications across the range from qualitative ethnographic small-scale to large-scale evaluations and RCTs</li> </ul>
Voluntary/community sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Research on very specific issues/topics/themes directly related to the mission, strategy, or programmes of delivery (e.g best practice studies; illuminative case studies etc.) Usually small-scale</li> </ul>
Private consultancy firms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Surveys</li> <li>▪ telephone interviews</li> <li>▪ multiple choice questionnaires</li> </ul>
Government departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Large-scale data sets</li> <li>▪ baseline work</li> <li>▪ often in-house longitudinal/evaluative studies.</li> </ul>
Practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ As part of teacher development programmes/ CPD;</li> <li>▪ award-bearing courses/programmes; small scale action research (schools-based) supported by GTCNI/CASS/LSDA.</li> </ul>
Independents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Various forms of research as required</li> </ul>

Taking each of the above forms of research in turn:

### **2.1.1. Academic research**

Education research tends to be supported within higher education institutions (HEIs) through research council and charities as well as through individual and

collective scholarship. HEIs (which include the two universities: University of Ulster and Queen’s University Belfast and the two University Colleges, St Mary’s University College and Stranmillis University College) contribute variously to educational research and are frequently involved in competitive tendering within Northern Ireland eg the DE bi-annual research and evaluation proposals. Each HEI has its own research strategies and areas of research strengths, methodological expertise and areas of focused activity eg centres. Three have made returns for the forthcoming Research Assessment Exercise.

**Table 2: Higher education – academic research provision**

Higher Education Institution	Research Themes/Priorities	Areas of Activity
University of Ulster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Citizenship and Conflict</li> <li>▪ Schooling and Teacher Education</li> <li>▪ Schools and FE</li> <li>▪ ICT and e-portfolios</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ UNESCO Centre</li> <li>▪ Centre for the Study of Conflict (1977-2000) (CAIN)</li> </ul>
Queen’s University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Education in Divided Societies</li> <li>▪ Teaching Learning and Assessment</li> <li>▪ Children’s Rights and participation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ NFER @ Queen’s</li> <li>▪ Research Forum for the Child</li> </ul>
St Mary’s University College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inclusion and Diversity (Special Needs)</li> <li>▪ Curriculum</li> <li>▪ Teacher Development</li> </ul>	
Stranmillis University College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Early Childhood Education</li> <li>▪ Teacher Education</li> </ul>	

As a result of the unique experiences of education in Northern Ireland over the past forty years, unsurprisingly, the main themes which transects all HEIs research foci are that of Inclusion, Conflict and Divided Societies.

**2.1.2. Voluntary/community sector**

There is a significant range of local charities/NGO’s who commission and in some cases undertake small-scale research projects that are low-cost. The orientation is generally applied research and/or illuminative case studies of best practice. For example, Barnardos (NI) tend to undertake most of its research and evaluation needs in-house; commissioning external work occasionally, but usually for work valued at £5,000 or less. Similarly, the Human Rights Commission has

the potential to fund research on education, training and/or children but the annual budget is less than £10,000.

### **2.1.3. Private consultancy firms**

Private consultancy firms have been generally effective at working in competitive, contract-research environments. This group have benefited particularly from the procurement approach which created a public call for research proposals co-ordinated by the Central Procurement Agency. Many UK (and indeed global) firms have local offices in Northern Ireland. They tend to undertake atheoretical types of research e.g. customer satisfaction surveys; reviews of initiatives and the development of strategies using telephone or postal surveys – work which tends to be less academically attractive to educational researchers. Many tend to lack sufficient educational knowledge and expertise and some have a reputation for focusing overly on outcomes and presentation, lacking quality and depth.

### **2.1.4. Government departments**

Government departments in Northern Ireland undertake research internally as well as procure it externally. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) Education Branch provides the DE with a professional service covering statistics, research and analysis and is the principal source of official information used to inform policy process and support decision-making. The branch maintains a number of detailed education datasets, including data on school enrolments, and school leavers' qualifications and destinations, teacher numbers; pupil-teacher ratios and participation rates. They are reviewed every five years for quality and information relating to these is disseminated via regular press releases. (e.g. see [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg.htm)). There is also a similar function within DEL whereby the Analytical Services group is made up of economists and statisticians – a number of whom work specifically on tertiary education analysis. The group maintains and analyses a number of FE and HE datasets which provide information on FE enrolments, NI students enrolled on and gaining qualifications from higher education courses at UK higher education institutions, and students enrolled on and gaining qualifications from higher education courses at NI higher education institutions. Information is also provided on the destinations of NI domiciled students after graduation from HE and those students' (regardless of domicile) destinations from the NI HEIs. The available FE and HE statistical bulletins can be found at <http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/statistics-and-research/statistics.htm>. The group also internally undertakes and externally commissions research on FE and HE through its Research Agenda and also in conjunction with other bodies for example the ESRC or other UK Departments or HE Funding Councils (further details can be found at <http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/statistics-and-research/stats-research.htm>).

### **2.1.5. Practitioners**

Practitioner Research in Northern Ireland is significantly underdeveloped, under-recognised and until recently un-coordinated. The work in Northern Ireland is promoted in a number of ways by a variety of stakeholders (e.g. through

university teacher education programmes; the ELBs' Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS) teacher development initiatives, RTU, the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) through supporting Essential Skills and the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland [GTCNI] by teacher bursaries etc) but, as yet, has never enjoyed the support and infrastructure that has been available and continues to be present in other parts of the United Kingdom (e.g. National Teacher Research Panel [England]; Best Practice Research Awards [DfES]; Networked Learning Communities [National College of School Leadership]; Chartered Teacher Programme [Scotland]). The GTCNI, established as recently as 2000, promotes a policy of teaching as a 'research-driven', and 'research informed' profession ([http://www.gtcni.org.uk/uploads/docs/GTC\\_code.pdf](http://www.gtcni.org.uk/uploads/docs/GTC_code.pdf)).

According to the GTCNI Code of Values (2004), teachers will 'as reflective practitioners, contribute to the review and revision of policies and practices with a view to optimising the opportunities for pupils or addressing identified individual or institutional needs' (p4). While these notions, allied to that of the 'reflective practitioner' in DE's Teacher Education Framework, are frequently heard in the discourse of education and teacher development in Northern Ireland, the role of practitioner research is significantly under-utilised in terms of knowledge production, teacher development and school improvement. Related to this, there has been a lack of profile and opportunities for dissemination of practitioner research until recently.

To this end, GTCNI has supported the development of the Access to Research Resources for Teachers Space (ARRTS) which is an educational research database making relevant publications available to educational professionals "at the touch of a button" ([www.artts.gtcni.org.uk](http://www.artts.gtcni.org.uk)). The database has been developed to promote evidence-informed practice and policy-making in education and encourage a partnership between the local educational research community and teachers. It also provides opportunities for teachers and other educational professionals across the world to access a large range of scholarly literature on Education in Northern Ireland and to find research that is relevant to their needs.

#### **2.1.6. *Independents***

Other national research organisations, both university-based and also independent have bid for research contracts within Northern Ireland and have been part of the knowledge landscape over the years. These independents have, on occasions, been seen to bring additional, external expertise and 'objectivity' to the educational issues in Northern Ireland by the governmental departments that supported them but have been viewed by academic researchers as poaching local monies from the already small pool leading to some criticisms about their limited knowledge and expertise regarding the Northern Ireland environment or its education system.

## 2.2. Outstanding issues

- To date the approach to educational research at the Northern Ireland strategic level would generally be described as ‘ad hoc’ and fragmentary. There is (as yet) no agreed or co-ordinated strategy for educational research and development at the Northern Ireland level and, to this extent, the research community could undoubtedly operate in a more streamlined and efficient fashion in the coming period. Northern Ireland clearly needs a more co-ordinated system of research development and support which simultaneously meets local priority research needs while at the same time addressing the developmental capacity-building needs of local researchers. However, as a pre-requisite for this, there is a need for greater ‘buy-in’ to research informed policy by government involving a fundamental recognition that good research can really help to inform and address problems of strategic importance in Northern Ireland’s education sector.
- In more recent years, various education stakeholder groups have developed their own internally-set research strategies, plans and targets in line with corporate/business plans some of which are publicly available and some not. Thus, DEL has its Research Agenda (2007-2009); DE has its Business Plan; ESA will have to develop its strategy as its identity evolves and the universities have their research agendas/strategies in line with their universities’ missions and with a view to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).
- Funding for educational research in Northern Ireland has been piecemeal and fragmented and it is generally agreed that there is inadequate investment. Listed below are a variety of sources:
  - Each government department has a small research budget. For instance, the Department of Education’s total budget per annum is approximately £300,000 (Gardner and Gallagher, 2007).
  - The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has a designated research budget.
  - The education and library boards (ELBs) have occasionally funded work linked to educational research though this usually has a development focus and is often run through the Regional Training Unit (RTU).
  - Quangos with small research budgets (e.g. Equality Commission; Human Rights Commission; Commissioner for Children and Young Persons etc.)
  - Charities and Trusts (e.g. Joseph Rowntree Charitable trust; Nuffield Foundation; CfBT Education Trust; Atlantic Philanthropies etc.)
  - Commercial sponsors (e.g. Astra Zeneca has funded several initiatives in science education research).

- European Commission funding, especially through the Peace and Reconciliation Fund, although this has mostly supported social inclusion projects and development rather than research.
- Academic research councils such as ESRC, Nuffield etc.
- Funding made available to support Northern Ireland extensions to GB projects such as ESRC/TLRP.
- The above resources are made available in the absence of a coherent, coordinated, overall regional strategy. In the coming period, the ESA will have a research and development section which will subsume the research budgets for CCEA and the ELBs and additionally, some of the NISRA staff working in the DE will pass to this new body. Thus ESA will have a critically important role in determining future research priorities and processes in the future.



### **3. Accountability and quality for education research in Northern Ireland**

#### **3.1. Provision**

In the interests of accountability and best practice, there is increasing attention within government departments such as DE and DEL on the importance of routinely monitoring the performance of policy initiatives across the education sector. To address these issues, DE commissioned a project to undertake a review of its monitoring, research and advice mechanisms. One of the recommendations of the report of the project was that, as a means of engaging with the academic community in a positive and controlled manner, DE/ESA should establish an education research forum. This has led to the recent initiative of the Education Research Forum comprising members of DE, UCETNI (Universities Council for Teacher Education in Northern Ireland) and the Education and Training Inspectorate. Additionally, DEL operates a Departmental Cross-Divisional Strategy Forum, represented at senior management level, which determines the specification of research issues through its Research Agenda. Policy and Service Delivery branches in conjunction with the Analytical Services group work together to deliver the Research Agenda through the selection of external researchers, steering the research projects and quality controlling research outputs. The DEL has also employed an independent researcher, as a ‘critical friend’, to evaluate its research agenda.

With regard to specific projects, funders generally have quality assurance (QA) built into the research contract. For governmental departments, each commissioned project has its terms of reference and is required to have a research steering group with representatives and experts from the field/relevant organisations. This group will oversee progress, monitor budgets, methods and sign off the various stages of the reporting through a series of advisory meetings and feedback on interim reports.

In-house research by governmental departments must adhere to protocols and conform to national standards eg NISRA must abide by the ‘badged statistics’ or official national statistics of the United Kingdom Statistics Authority<sup>18</sup>.

Academic research conforms to the standard requirements of peer review (conferences; peer-reviewed journals; book publications) and the metrics associated with the Research Assessment Exercise [RAE].

Although, the RAE has been a driver towards improved academic research quality within the Northern Ireland Higher Education sector, there are nevertheless some inhibiting factors. As a result, according to the 2001 RAE ratings, HE research could be considered average with one of the two universities receiving a grade 4

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<sup>18</sup> For example, figures used to support key policy targets or indicators.

and the other a grade 3a<sup>19</sup>. Due to the low number of HEIs in Northern Ireland, the RAE inevitably leads to a high degree of competitiveness which does not always serve the (small-size of this) educational community as well as it could and may have a tendency to drive down quality by restricting the extent of or potential for partnership working. Despite this competitiveness, there is still significant social capital evident and a demonstrable willingness to co-operate on research across the HEI sector.

### **3.2. Outstanding issues**

- There is a need for greater accountability procedures for judging the quality of practitioner research and how professional development contributes to the overall knowledge generation and management systems in Northern Ireland.
- As approaches to research diversify (e.g. creative, arts-based; practitioner/academic collaborative approaches; triangulated) there is a need to have increased understanding (and acceptability) of criteria for such approaches and what they have to offer in terms of understanding and application as well as developing audience-appropriate means of dissemination.

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<sup>19</sup> Consultation with HEI colleagues suggests that similar numbers of active, academic educational researchers have been returned for the 2008 RAE, across three of the four institutions, and the quality assessment of this exercise is awaited.

## 4. Capacity building for education research in Northern Ireland

### 4.1. Provision

As indicated above, there is as yet, no co-ordinated Northern Ireland policy or strategy for educational research and development. There have been various attempts to encourage some consensus within this relatively small jurisdiction over the past ten years but in a study with key educational stakeholders undertaken by Gardner and Gallagher (2002) they clearly indicated that, accordingly, ‘no overall strategy could be discerned’. The political and educational climate is however currently changing (as indeed are some of the long-standing personnel in key positions), evidenced by the attendance of and contributions by substantial numbers of invited politicians and educational policymakers at the recent Northern Ireland TLRP showcase event held at Queen’s University in May 2008. Between this and the initiative demonstrated by the Department of Education to push for the newly-formed Educational Research Forum for Northern Ireland to be created, there is the opportunity to develop a discourse of educational research that has been hitherto missing. The objectives for the Education Research Forum include foci on what counts as basic and applied research and where forms of development by practitioners fit in the development of an agenda of shared research priorities in relation to education for the coming era. The specific aims of the Forum are:

- To discuss relevant educational research currently being undertaken/planned by group members;
- To highlight the key policy areas/issues for the Department/ESA now and those emerging for the future;
- To discuss and share ideas/developments relating to research and methodological issues;
- To identify and explore opportunities to improve the effective use of research findings and dissemination of these to a wider audience.

Across the two universities, there are a number of significant research capacity building initiatives, viz:

- The UNESCO Centre, established formally in February 2001, at the University of Ulster, received significant funding from Atlantic Philanthropies to support research and development work in education for pluralism, human rights and democracy. Total income for the five-year period (2002-07) has been over £5.8 million with over 30 projects (e.g. on Academic Selection and Transfer to Post-Primary Education; Education and Community Relations; Integrated Education in Northern Ireland) have been completed. (<http://unesco.ulster.ac.uk/>). The UNESCO Centre also offers annual research studentships.

- The NFER@Queen's Centre has been established as a specialised centre for applied educational research through a strategic partnership between the National Foundation of Educational Research and Queen's School of Education established in 2003 ([www.qub.ac.uk/nfer](http://www.qub.ac.uk/nfer)). During 2007/08, the Centre has secured new external research grants to a value of just over £1 million and has over 10 full-time researchers. This represents significant capacity-building. The Centre is playing a leading role in the development of a number of new initiatives. One is the Joint Learning Initiative on Children and Ethnic Diversity (JLICED) – which represents a global initiative bringing together over 60 leading researchers, policy-makers and practitioners worldwide. Its aim will be to work in partnership with local organisations in regions characterised by ethnic divisions and conflict to help develop innovative and effective early childhood programs aimed at building more inclusive communities. Another major new initiative is 'Improving Children's Lives' – with additional investment of some £2.1 million promised. The Centre has research expertise across the full range of methods from in-depth qualitative case studies through to rigorous experimental trials and large-scale surveys, making use of advanced and sophisticated statistical modelling techniques.
- INCORE (International Conflict Research) is a joint project of the United Nations University and the University of Ulster and is located within its Faculty of Social Sciences. Amongst other related activities, it conducts interdisciplinary research on conflict and peace issues. Much of INCORE's research focuses on societies in transition and most is international and comparative. INCORE offers a variety of online services and comprehensive databases and resource guides to conflict world-wide such as Conflict Data Service (CDS) and Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN). (<http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/services/>)
- The Research Forum for the Child, established in Queen's University in 2005, is centred in the School of Education. It aims to promote high quality, inter-disciplinary and international research that provides a better understanding of the issues that affect children and young people in order to improve their life chances and experiences (<http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/TheResearchForumForTheChild/>). At present it has 70 representatives across 11 disciplines and has links with a number of universities in the Republic of Ireland. Its specific objectives is to develop capacity for high quality research relating to children and young people and to this end it supports collaborative initiatives and runs seminars and an annual conference.
- The Institute of Child Care Research (ICCR) is based in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Queen's (<http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/InstituteofChildCareResearch/>). ICCR has seventeen members of staff and is strongly linked to service-providers and policy-makers, and its mission is to provide research to meet the needs of all children in their daily lives within the following themes:
  - Youth development, lifestyles and social behaviour;

- Parenting and the early years;
  - Children in the care of public authorities or adopted;
  - Mental health and disability in children and young people.
- Another significant area of research development has emerged from the government's Shared Future Agenda. This initiative based at Queen's promises to shape the policy agenda on school collaboration over the next decade. Recent work includes research collaboration between schools and a £3.6 million award from the International Fund for Ireland and Atlantic Philanthropies to run a three year programme to encourage interdenominational collaboration among schools ([www.schoolsworkingtogether.co.uk](http://www.schoolsworkingtogether.co.uk)).

Within the HEIs there is a commitment to building research capacity regionally and nationally in particular through links with the Research Capacity Building Network of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme. For example, Queen's hosts an ESRC Regional Training Centre (2006-08) which runs events by groups such as QUALITI (Cardiff). Additionally there are regular sponsored research capacity-building events (by BERA; TLRP; Standing Conference for Teacher Education North and South [SCoTENS]<sup>20</sup>) for researchers in the four HEIs to meet with colleagues in the South of Ireland and across the Celtic jurisdictions (TLRP Celtic Capacity Building, University of Ulster, June 2008).

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

- Northern Ireland needs a more co-ordinated system of research development and support which simultaneously meets local priority research needs while at the same time addressing the developmental capacity-building needs of local researchers. As a pre-requisite for this, however, there is a need for greater and demonstrable commitment to and investment in research-informed policy by government involving a fundamental recognition that good research can really help to inform and address, as well as evaluate, problems of strategic importance in education here.

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<sup>20</sup> Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS)



## 5. Conclusion

In considering how educational research can be strategically managed and developed in the future, four key challenges will need to be addressed, as identified by Gardner and Gallagher (2007). These are as follows:

- Research capacity
- Strategic direction
- Innovation
- Accommodating the instrumental

Each of these challenges is examined in more detail below.

### 5.1. *Research capacity*

There are large sums of public money being diverted to private consultants for work that could be carried out by academic educational researchers. For instance, during the four-year period 1998-2002, the Department of Education spent £4.3 million on education-related consultancy, with 89 per cent of this (£3.8m) going to one company. In 2002, the percentage expenditure on research and evaluation by the Department of Education was 80 per cent (academic research) and 20 per cent (consultancy) whereas by 2005, this market-share has changed dramatically to 37 per cent (academic) and 63 per cent (consultancy). The shift away from funding university-based educational research may be explained, at least in part, by the overhead costs which are more explicit and cumbersome in calculation than the daily rate or block fee favoured by most consultancy organisations. It is not uncommon for a university bid to lose to a lower consultancy costing because of the costing models. It is likely that this situation will be exacerbated by the introduction of the full economic costing (fEC) model of research costing, which is now government-mandated for university research bidding, because it makes research considerably more expensive for funding bodies as they pick up the infrastructural and indirect costs of carrying out research in universities.

To increase collective knowledge and understanding there is a need to maximise the dissemination of research in the public domain<sup>21</sup>. Research carried out by consultants is often read no wider than by the commissioning client. It is almost entirely a matter for the commissioning department whether the reports are made public or are used internally to inform, or perhaps even justify, specific policy decisions.

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<sup>21</sup> The Learning and Skills Development Agency NI (LSDA) research service offers a search facility that can range from providing evidence for the introduction of new curriculum areas, best practice in employer engagement through to evaluation of new initiatives like the Vocational Enhancement Programme, and the impact of the increased demand for ESOL provision. A number of research reports are already available on the TLC web portal covering the areas of employer engagement; 14-19 curriculum; governance funding and accountability; leadership; e-learning and m-learning. LSDA NI also supports small scale action research projects. <http://www.lsdani.org.uk/programmes/>

Also, although Northern Ireland has a strong voluntary and community sector, with a myriad of grassroots educational projects being implemented across the region, little of this work is published or subject to peer review.

There are insufficient numbers of academic researchers to carry out the work. If anything, the numbers may be decreasing as a result of the advanced age profile across the educational research sector as a whole. For instance, across the UK, more than 52 per cent are over fifty years of age and only 8 per cent are under 34 years of age (Mills et al, 2006). A similar skew in the profile is evident in Northern Ireland. In the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), only 39 (fte) research active staff were included in the Education UoA<sup>22</sup>. This compares unfavourably with 77 academics returned in Wales, 163 in Scotland and 1767 in England.

As a result of the small number of active researchers in Northern Ireland, the likelihood that the appropriate competence exists for any particular type or topic of research may also be low, especially given the plethora of potential research studies. Concerted efforts are clearly needed to create a sustainable ‘community of practice’ that will increase the numbers of competent researchers available in the future to provide a more solid research base.

The potential capacity within the HEIs is under-utilised, partly due to inadequate government spend on research, compounded by a lack of prioritisation of issues to be researched, the absence of a co-ordinated strategy to harness and build capacity and inadequate liaison with philanthropic foundations which support the educational research agenda.

## **5.2. Strategic direction**

Instrumental survey-type work, currently directed more towards commercial consultants through a select tendering process, may not be attractive to academic researchers who are continually being pressed by their institutions to seek peer-reviewed funds. As Gardner and Gallagher (2007) caution, if educational researchers continue to resist or withdraw from such work, the 80 per cent market share of DE funds for 2005 won by private consultants is likely to be consolidated and perhaps increased. The government and its agencies and departments, due to accountability pressures, tend to have a predilection for ‘quick and dirty’ research done ‘yesterday’ for decisions to be made ‘today’ but this runs counter to much of the peer-reviewed research, to which academic researchers are drawn and which involves more sophisticated and conceptual attention and therefore more time than some decision contexts can accommodate. Thus, the challenge is for educational researchers to engage with government departments in developing a projective research strategy with the aims of ensuring their work is not marginal and identifying what research is needed before it develops the ‘yesterday’ urgency. This would also facilitate planning regarding the research competence needed, to address the identified needs.

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<sup>22</sup> 18 FTE staff were returned by Queen’s University, and received a grade 4 and 20.5 FTE staff were returned by the University of Ulster who received a grade 3a.

Capacity building will also be achieved as a result of meaningful partnerships and collaborative working and a number of significant recent developments have occurred in this area. For instance, as a result of a roundtable discussion in 2004, the following important outcomes ensued:

- Higher education representatives recognized their responsibility to engage in capacity building work through links with the Research Capacity Building Network of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). Additionally, there was a commitment to strengthen collaborative links (e.g. the UNESCO Centre in the University of Ulster; National Foundation for Educational Research at Queen's [NFER@Queen's]).
- DE agreed to address the need to reduce the ad hoc and fragmentary nature of much educational research activity in Northern Ireland by developing a more coherent strategy. Themes were developed<sup>23</sup> by the Department which formed the mainstay of their Strategic Plan for Education – April 2006 – March 2008 (DE, 2006).

DEL, since its 2004 Research Agenda, has made its strategy publicly available and has moved away from the open procurement process considering the commissioning of each project on an individual basis.

### **5.3. Innovation**

Although there is insufficient opportunity for innovative, experimental work, especially when the main role for research seems so resolutely instrumental, a third challenge is the need for academic researchers to come up with the ideas and to persuade funding bodies of the merit in supporting innovative research. Research can (and should) develop new knowledge, explore new practices and create new understandings. However, the pace and pressure that characterizes educational contexts today is antithetical to genuine innovation. Increased investment in longitudinal research, though expensive, would also be a valuable feature for some of the most intangible and intransigent of issues here (eg destinations of trainees and further education students).

### **5.4. Accommodating the instrumental**

In the highly politicised and divided society that is Northern Ireland, educational research may be viewed as primarily serving policy expediency. According to Gardner and Gallagher (2007), educational research in Northern Ireland has arguably been promoted primarily to meet a departmental need for reassurance rather than developing new knowledge, insights and understandings - what is best described as an instrumentalist approach.

The challenge here is for educational researchers to engage with an instrumentalist approach and influence it through developing new knowledge and offering new insights into the complex social phenomena that make up a national

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<sup>23</sup> The four main themes were: Valuing Education; Fulfilling Potential; Promoting Equality and Inclusion; Resourcing Education.

educational system. This is what will promote better policy-making and better practice, especially where researchers produce high quality work.

### **5.5. Implications**

There has been a recognised need for increased discourse between the various stakeholders in Northern Ireland on educational research (Gardner & Gallagher, 2007). The changing social and political climate in the region, coupled with the impending structural changes in education through the RPA and the increasing demands for accountability at all levels in education makes this even more of a necessity. There is growing evidence of commitment to dialogue through the formation of the Education Research Forum for Northern Ireland which is bringing together members of the DE and the HEIs. However, to be more widely effective, this body needs to be opened up to a broader range of key representatives in the quest for greater research efficiency and partnership cohesion.

Educationists need to be committed to knowing what others need and what others do in education in Northern Ireland and, given the advantage of its small geography and demographics, this is feasible. The Education Research Forum is a significant first step. In the wider UK arena, the emergence of the SFRE Project is set to make a substantial contribution to the local process with its practical agenda and its desire to develop understanding of various research differences, needs and priorities.

Given the anticipated education agenda over the next 5-15 years, there is increasing demand for rigorous evaluation of policy implementation, the planning for which needs to be inbuilt from the outset. Whilst it is desirable to narrow the gap between research, policy and practice in order to make research more practically relevant, a centralist, evidence-based, managerial agenda should not predominate. There must always be room for more independent, critical and 'blue skies' approaches.

According to ESRC research demographics (see Lawn & Furlong, 2007) research capacity in Northern Ireland is unlikely to expand or develop significantly over the next 5 to 15 years. Nonetheless, the challenge involved in building capacity can be met, at least in part, by having a centre of research excellence guided by some kind of broadly-based, strategic, stakeholder forum including key statutory and voluntary groups (possibly centred in one institution) together with a broadened or more inclusive definition of educational research which reflects a more multi-disciplinary perspective (e.g psychology; geographical information systems [GIS]; social sciences etc). Moreover, such a centre of excellence should also encompass independent research and ensure that local research is contextualised nationally and internationally. The benefits of such a proposal should be given some serious consideration as discourse and partnerships, concerned about the future quality and capacity of educational research in Northern Ireland, continue to develop.

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## E. Glossary of Acronyms

ARRTS	Access to Research Resources for Teachers Space
CAIN	Conflict Archive on the Internet
CASS	Curriculum Advisory and Support Services
CCEA	Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment
CCMS	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
CDS	Conflict Data Service
CPA	Central Procurement Agency
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DE	Department of Education
DEL	Department of Employment and Learning
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
EPPI	Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre
ESA	Education Skills Authority
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
ELBs	Education and Library Boards
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FE	Further Education
GTCNI	General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland
HEIs	Higher education institutions
ICCR	Institute of Child Care Research
ICT	Information and Computing Technology
INCORE	International Conflict Research
JLICED	Joint Learning Initiative on Children and Ethnic Diversity
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NGO's	Non-Governmental Organisations
NI	Northern Ireland
NICER	Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research
NICIE	Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
QA	Quality Assurance
QUALITI	Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Innovation, Integration and Impact (part of ESRC National Centre for Research Methods)
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
RPA	Review of Public Administration
RTU	Regional Training Unit
SCoTENS	Standing Conference for Teacher Education North and South
TLRP	Teaching and Learning Research Programme
UCETNI	Universities Council for Teacher Education in Northern Ireland
UNESCO	United Nations Education and Science Council
UoA	Unit of Assessment