

Section II. Country summary reviews

II.1. England³

'I want to see more data generated by the profession to show what works, clearer information about teaching techniques that get results, more rigorous, scientifically-robust research about pedagogies which succeed and proper independent evaluations of interventions which have run their course. We need more evidence-based policy making, and for that to work we need more evidence.' (Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education – speech at the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services Annual Conference, June 2010)

'I want this Government to have effective policies that tackle Britain's problems and that means they have to be evidence-based. To convey the seriousness of what we are doing and its credibility, it is really important where possible we pilot, evaluate, publish evidence – and have it tested. We must also have sufficient confidence, when evidence starts coming in that something is not working, to be willing to change'. (David Willetts, Minister of State for Universities and Science, quoted in The Times, 9th June 2010)

It is difficult to separate England from the rest of the UK when looking at educational research. While Government is split in this way, many other funders and providers are not. As with the other countries of the UK, education research in England is a very broad field with a wide range of disciplines and approaches. An estimate of the value of this research in England in 2002 was of £70-75 million a year (CERI, 2002). Most research is undertaken by university departments, but there is also considerable research in this field undertaken by or for Government Departments, charities and not-for profit organisations, as well as think tanks and commercial research organisations.

Networks and initiatives to share and co-ordinate activity tend to be based on sectors due to the size and geographical dispersion within England, and as a result they tend to cover the whole of the UK. There is a danger that these UK-wide networks can become dominated by England and English interests, purely because that is where most participants are based.

Some UK-wide networks have specific English sectors, such as the Higher Education Academy. This is funded by a number of different agencies, but within England has funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England to undertake a number of specific activities.

Within other sectors there are specific initiatives. Within the Schools sector there is the National Teacher Research Panel (NTRP) which is an independent group of practising teachers and tutors who work to make sure that research in education takes account of the practitioner perspective. Within the Children's Services sector there is the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) which aims to identify, co-ordinate and disseminate national, regional and local knowledge and evidence about systems and practice.

Recent initiatives to improve the provision and use of educational research in England include:

- attempts to encourage greater collaboration in setting research priorities, particularly within Government. For example the Department for Education (previously DfES and DCSF) has involved University researchers in analytical planning through seeking views on evidence gaps at events and conferences, and at regular liaison meetings.
- collaborative efforts to promote the need to evidence-based policy and practice through, for example, the Coalition for Evidence-Based Education (CEBE). Led by Bob Slavin and others from York's Institute for Effective Education, under the patronage of Baroness Estelle Morris, CEBE has involved a series of consultation meetings during 2009 with potential users and stakeholders, looking to raise awareness of the need for sound evidence in education policy and practice.
- collaborative efforts to improve access to evidence for example through the Educational Evidence Portal which is attempting to provide access to evidence from a range of sources using a single search. Work is also underway to map and signpost available free-to-the-user research/ resource databases, and make this guide to the system easily accessible.
- The General Teaching Council for England has a 'Research for Teachers' feature which is designed and populated by CUREE (the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education). It contains substantial practitioner oriented presentations of cornerstone empirical studies and also strands of theoretically driven empirical work organized "tell the story" of key findings. What's distinctive is the way it links large scale research, practitioner research, research tools, research user tools, CPD activities – and then uses the GTC networks for mediation.

³ We are grateful to Deborah Wilson and Stephen Witt (Department for Education) for the text in this section.

There are particular challenges for Education research in England.

As previously mentioned, the size and geographical dispersion within England in relation to other countries of the UK makes it difficult to generate effective networks for sharing of information or co-ordination of initiatives. In addition, the split of Government responsibilities for education in 2007 between two Government Departments can also create difficulties, particularly where there are policy areas which may overlap (such as policy for the further education sector, or issues around promotion of higher education in schools).

Compared to other countries in the UK, England appears to have a more competitive market amongst institutions and organisations undertaking research because of the large number actually based in the country. This may discourage some of the overview and shared thinking which may be easier in smaller countries.

Future developments in England will also be subject to changing political priorities following the election of a Coalition Government in May 2010, and efforts to reduce the country's budget deficit. It may take some time for the longer-term implications to become apparent.

A key benefit of SFRE has been to encourage sharing of experience and ideas and the potential for more collaboration across the four countries of the UK. For example, prior to SFRE there were few inter-Governmental links on overall educational research strategy or practice.

What SFRE has left England with is a challenge to share experiences and discuss the implications further within existing networks across the country, and look at how we can support the recommendations that have emerged.

II.2. Northern Ireland⁴

The final summary report for Northern Ireland sets out recent developments on the current state of knowledge and management systems in education in Northern Ireland and concludes by projecting some future possibilities for this context. The description that follows necessarily reflects and is influenced by two main factors (i) the radically shifting social, political and economic situation both globally and locally, and (ii) the impact of the Strategic Forum for Research in Education (SFRE) itself on local developments, during this period (2008-2010).

During the period, developments that have been recorded are:

- Increased discourse and discussion amongst education stakeholders on improving the infrastructure in order to develop the evidence-base in education
- Increased recognition of the value of a more inclusive definition of educational research to embrace the variety of academic research coupled with systematically collected educational (statistical) information, all of which potentially contributes to the knowledge base
- Momentum to improve and co-ordinate an educational research agenda (with clear strategic priorities) through the recently formed Northern Ireland Education Research Forum (NIERF) which is championing this direction
- Improved use of technology for disseminations of NI research through educational data bases and repositories
- Continuing investment by charities, philanthropic bodies and NGOs in local educational research despite economic downturn
- Concerted efforts and initiatives to improve and build academic research capacity with professional researchers and in the dissemination, mediation and exchange of information
- Links and partnerships with the Republic of Ireland as well as Scotland, England and Wales strengthens the platform and impact of accumulating local research knowledge as well as drawing attention to unique strengths

⁴ We are grateful to Karen McCullough (Department of Education – Northern Ireland) and to Ruth Leitch (Queen's University Belfast) for the text in this section.

- A number of outputs documenting the baseline and developments of knowledge accumulation and management in NI and, despite fragmentation, the identification of pockets of good practice.

Issues identified requiring to be addressed include:

- Desire for a more coherent, shared, medium to long term strategic plan for research priorities across organizations, departments and sectors, leading to an improved evidence-base for educational policy decision-making
- Encouraging further dialogue, collaboration and improving partnerships and user engagement
- Lack of investment in research-informed policy by government and need for a fundamental shift to recognising that quality (as opposed to instrumental) research can inform and address, as well as evaluate, problems of strategic importance to education
- Challenges to increasing quantity, quality and retention of active researchers in the HEI in preparation for research assessment (Research Excellence Framework).
- Developing the infrastructure for accumulating knowledge and capitalizing on existing research in NI and as a means to identify key information gaps
- Finding ways to improve practitioner engagement and include quality practitioner research in the knowledge base
- Need for improved research capacity building and public understanding /valuing of educational research, including mediation and dissemination strategies
- Consideration of potential role for a centre for research excellence in a country of this size and given the current restructuring/rationalization of education management and support through the Review of Public Administration (RPA).

During the last three years, educationalists and policy makers in Northern Ireland have independently identified a broad range of challenges to be faced over the next decade within both school and post-compulsory sectors. These include pressures for rationalization of school provision, broader entitlement for children and young people, improved teaching, learning and assessment, the achievement of greater social equality and inclusion, adult literacy and numeracy and higher levels of attainment etc. The realization and resolution of many of these issues, across compulsory and post-compulsory sectors, would doubtlessly be enhanced by systematic research and careful management of knowledge and information. However, as yet and, despite aspirations, there has been no transparent agreement on priorities nor the development of a coherent agenda.

A key component for the future direction and co-ordination of knowledge management in NI is currently seen as residing in NIERF. This forum was established by DE in early 2008, in an effort to build links with the wider educational research community and, to address the fragmentation and connectivity problems that exist in Northern Ireland with regard to educational research. The most significant event has been the hosting of a symposium to engage researchers with differing user groups and evaluation communities in Northern Ireland, in pursuit of local coherence and improved quality in educational research, policy and practice. The event was opened by the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education and the symposium generated key research priorities and a positive orientation towards further collaboration.

Participants at the event recognised that the vision of a coherent knowledge management strategy for Northern Ireland is unlikely to be practicable. It was suggested that we do not necessarily need ‘coherence’ in the sense of some notion of single coherence, as each community, sector, department or organisation has its own set of priorities and methodologies which rightly differ (but may indeed also partly overlap) and which are fit for their own specific purpose(s). We do, however, need to work towards a knowledge creation framework, within which some common coherence and goals can be articulated through principles and key elements that relate each to the other to form part of a larger, shared vision.

The following were identified as some of the key principles which might help to define a Knowledge Creation Framework for Northern Ireland.

Alignment: of priorities/strategies etc within departments/sectors and between departments/sectors in order to make the best use of resources and outcomes

Communication: improved communication about what research is available or forthcoming and its locus (we see a single web-portal as an important tool)

Accessibility: to existing data sources, to more information about what everyone is doing (again, linked through a web-portal)

Collaboration: between various knowledge creation sectors/parties

Consultation: improved consultation at each stage of knowledge generation, including consultation on priorities

Interdisciplinary: more dialogue with other professions (eg. educational psychologists; sociologists) working in the area of educational research and more opportunities for developing interdisciplinary research

Peer review: further development of peer review as integral to research commissioning and evaluation, required at each stage of process; consider whether this development might be taken forward by NIERF

Dissemination: viewed as a crucial element of the research process, including a policy response on how any research is intended to be used.

This event was to be followed by other planned symposia with policymakers and practitioners that have not yet happened. Due to a variety of factors, such as change in personnel, the economic downturn and priorities over restructuring (the Education Skills Authority), the initial momentum associated with NIERF has been constrained during 2010. With an imminent political shift in attention away from structural issues arising from the RPA, this setback is due to be resolved.

Through NIERF, key players are intent on exploring and developing further its role in the co-ordination and collaboration between all stakeholders involved in educational research in Northern Ireland. Developing educational research discourse is likely to be achieved by extending the current NIERF representation to include other organizations, such as GTC(NI), Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), teacher unions, business and the voluntary sector. The current hiatus may also indicate the need for reconsideration of the constitution and operating principles of NIERF, such that its role and development can be sustained. Good will and best intentions however will need to be underpinned swiftly by strategic financial investment by the statutory sector in a research strategy, if those involved are serious about addressing and enhancing the quality and effectiveness of educational policy and practice. In this sense the proposal for a centre for research excellence should not be lost to the agenda.

Finally, SFRE itself has been instrumental in furthering the educational research agenda in Northern Ireland. Locally-based, embryonic movements were given significant support and impetus through engagement with other national sub-systems, including latterly the Republic of Ireland. Frameworks, stimulus questions, discussions and, most particularly, ongoing fora and networking have played their part in altering the landscape and shaping the horizons of how knowledge about educational matters is (or should be) created, mediated and applied in a country the size of Northern Ireland. Given the strides that have been made here and in the other three countries, the continuance of this body is cost-effective in supporting and assuring the drive towards good practice.

II.3. Scotland⁵

Context

Since the creation of Scotland's devolved parliament in 1999, there has been a keen interest in enhancing the education system through the development of ideas built on the views of the community. However, it is important to note that Scotland is already distinctive within the UK as it has maintained a discrete system affected but not shaped by policy from elsewhere in the UK (see for example: www.scotland.gov.uk/publications). The Scottish Government, established in 1999, has initiated several major policy developments aimed at driving transformational change across the education system – from early years provision, through compulsory schooling and into adult learning. The Director General for Education is charged with implementing these policies in collaboration with delivery partners in local authorities, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, Learning and Teaching Scotland, Skills Development Scotland, Scotland's Colleges and Universities Scotland amongst others.

The Education Analytical Support Division (EAS) in the Scottish Government provides a range of analytical support services (research, statistics, economics) to the Children and Young People, Learning and Lifelong Learning Directorates. The research undertaken by EAS is a mix of in-house and externally commissioned work. Commissioned work ranges from research to support specific policy initiatives (e.g. research on the consultation on National Qualifications, www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/02/23130007/0) through to major international studies of educational achievement. Increasingly, research undertaken or commissioned by EAS will focus on what works in terms of improving the educational outcomes of Scotland's children and young people and on providing evidence of progress against the Outcomes and Indicators set out in the Government's National Performance Framework (www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/11/13092240/9). EAS will also be reviewing its analytical approach and commitments in light of the current financial climate, ensuring that its resources are focused on evidence that will have a high impact.

Curriculum reform – Curriculum for Excellence

Curriculum for Excellence (www.ltscotland.org.uk/curriculumforexcellence/) is the key programme of reform at the heart of Scottish Government education policy and which defines the contribution of young people's learning to achievement of the National Outcomes. Schools and colleges are already making changes to learning and teaching based on the information they have relating to the new curriculum. From August 2010 all children and young people will experience the new curriculum and new qualifications will come on-stream from the summer exam diet of 2014. In addition, Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy set out the Scottish Government's ambitions for skills, in a lifelong learning context. As debate and discussion on the ways in which education within Scotland can be research informed and curriculum reform can be supported by the building of research collaborations and networks (see for example Applied Educational Research Scheme – www.aers.org.uk/aers/, Schools of Ambition – www.ltscotland.org.uk/schoolsofambition/about/schoolsofambitionresearch.asp, Scottish Educational Research Association – www.sera.ac.uk/) policy has reflected an increasingly holistic view of learners and the learning process. High quality analytical support is recognised as being essential to achieving the transformational change demanded by Curriculum for Excellence, and for achieving and maintaining a successful Scottish education system for the future.

Education Research

The Scottish Government has led the development of curriculum reform but has also helped to establish collaborative research work along with the Scottish Funding Council by funding the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS, www.aers.org.uk/aers/) between 2003 and 2008, in recognition of the importance of high quality education research, and amid concerns about an apparent lack of education research capacity within Scottish Universities. After a competitive process of peer review, the grant for the AERS was awarded to a consortium of three universities – Edinburgh, Stirling and Strathclyde. Launched in January 2004, AERS was a £2 million, five year programme

⁵ We are grateful to Fiona Fraser (Scottish Government) and to Lorna Hamilton (University of Edinburgh) for their contributions to this section.

aimed at developing research capacity in the education field in Scotland. AERS has helped to enhance capacity, collaborations and research methods training.

The end of the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) in 2008 and how its legacy has followed on through the networks supported by SERA is an important matter for consideration. The role of SERA was felt by participants to SFRE to be to build practitioner, policy and international links. The extent to which a network such as SERA required funding to undertake this role was debated. Overall there appeared to be some lack of capacity in place, partially due to issues of scale and likely to be compounded by reducing funds in the future.

The General Teaching Council Scotland (one of the oldest Teaching Councils in the world) promotes continuing professional development (CPD) and through sponsorship supports individual practitioner research projects. Considerable funds have also been spent on supporting a new look at teacher education (Scottish Teachers for New Era – www.abdn.ac.uk/stne) with combined funding from the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council and the Hunter Foundation.

Scotland also participated in the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), which had the aim of 'supporting and developing UK educational research to improve outcomes for learners of all ages'.

Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008 results highlighted the strength of a growing research culture in academic institutions in Scotland in conjunction with increasingly high quality outputs. The extension of such success will be supported by groups emerging from AERS, the development of engagement in, and with, research by practitioners and the increasingly strong academic research community.

Further priorities

At the first meeting of the UK Strategic Forum for Research in Education, Professor Sally Brown (University of Stirling) generated a highly informative outline of issues in Scotland (Brown, 2008) with regard to education research quality and capacity. After much discussion, this led to the creation of priorities for future consideration in developing both these aspects of research in Scotland.

The work of the SFRE has generated discussion and debate around notions of research creation, mediation and application in Scotland. An important aspect of this work has been the catalyst provided by SFRE for each jurisdiction within the UK to learn from each other and engage more fully within each area, with those who seek to fund, generate and use educational research.

Consequently in November 2009, Scottish Government (Education Analytical Services) initiated a meeting bringing together the main public sector funders and stakeholders of educational research (including HMIE, LTS, SQA, SFC and local authorities) to establish how they currently engage with research and where their future research priorities lie. Key elements of the discussions included:

- The capacity within Scotland/ outside Scotland to provide this evidence at a reasonable cost and of a reasonable quality
- What scope there is to work with others within the public sector to meet evidence needs
- How the public sector can best engage with the suppliers of evidence

Building on the outcomes of this meeting, the Scottish Educational Research Association (sera.ac.uk) held an event in February 2010. Those who had attended the Scottish Government event were also invited to attend this meeting, along with practitioners and academic researchers.

The starting point for this seminar was that a more explicit articulation of strategy, purpose and coherence would be helpful in encouraging research which might have an impact upon policy and practice. In particular research to address the strategic

priorities of the policy community and assist the community to enhance the education system in a time of diminishing budgets is needed. An assumption was also made that a collaborative approach to the generation and sharing of research would be worthwhile and positive in trying to achieve impact. It was felt that such collaboration should also be multi-disciplinary making use of a wide variety of skills and perspectives. It was noted that, while previous and current developments (AERS, 2003-2008; Schools of Ambition, 2008; Chartered Teacher Association, founded 2010) highlight the possible benefits of collaborative working around particular topics or development areas, a more strategic approach at a variety of levels would help to encourage such projects and the interconnectedness of any debates and evidence accumulation. One step towards this goal would be work on a framework for sharing both strategy and evidence across groups, sectors, creators and users of research (see Hamilton et al, 2010).

II.4. Wales⁶

Over the last ten years, the Welsh Assembly Government has developed an ambitious reform agenda that is placing learning at the centre of social and economic wellbeing. The Learning Country (WAG 2001) and The Learning Country: Vision into Action (WAG 2006) have mapped out an educational path for Wales that celebrates the country's strong cultural traditions but also takes learners and learning in exciting and challenging new directions.

During the same period, however, this 'small and clever country' (WAG 2004) has seen a significant decline in the volume and quality of education research activity taking place within its universities. The Education Subpanel of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE 2009) has drawn attention to the decrease in the number of research active staff returned and the 'low average quality profile for Welsh institutions'.

There are small pockets of excellence in research in Wales - for example, Bangor University hosts the prestigious ESRC Centre for Research on Bilingualism in Theory and Practice. However, with the notable exception of Cardiff University, other Welsh HEIs appear to be struggling to reach a critical mass of education research activity. Such capacity as there is can best be described as 'fragile' and in need of continued support and encouragement.

As Wales' distinctive policy agenda continues to diverge from other parts of the UK, the fragility of its education research base is an issue of significant concern to the academic research community in Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government. In order to address this, there have been a number of recent initiatives which have tried to draw together and consolidate the small pockets of research.

WERN (Welsh Education Research Network) started in early 2007 as an informal network of active researchers from different institutions in Wales. It subsequently received funding from ESRC and HEFCW and was able to distribute bursaries to groups and individuals across the country to enable them to develop research expertise and write research proposals. Although WERN's funding came to an end in 2009, it was favourably evaluated and has contributed to increasing recognition that institutions need to work together if they are to address the education research deficit across the country.

The Welsh Assembly Government's Higher Education strategy 'For Our Future' focuses on the need for collaboration and the delivery of research which is 'consistently rigorous and internationally respected'. In building a more robust education research community and promoting dialogue between researchers and policy-makers, Wales faces a number of challenges. For a country with a small population, it has eleven HEIs (including the Open University in Wales) which are geographically dispersed and receive lower levels of per student expenditure than in England and Scotland (WAG 2009). A successful collaborative project reviewing the findings of the TLRP demonstrated the benefits of partnership working between Government, researchers and practitioners.

⁶ We are grateful to Debbie Tynen (Welsh Assembly Government), Sue Davies (Trinity College, Carmathen) and Sally Power (University of Cardiff) for their contributions to this section.

There are also challenges in fostering research dialogue between HEIs, WAG and local authorities. Local authorities in Wales, perhaps more so than elsewhere in the UK, are seen as playing a crucial role in interpreting, delivering and evaluating policy. However, while the political significance of local authorities has been upheld, their capacity is constrained by their size. Although authorities vary widely in size (Cardiff has 48,000 children while Merthyr has only 9,000) and density (Cardiff has 341 children per square kilometre, Powys has just 4), they are generally much smaller than their counterparts in England. These combined difficulties of resource constraint and diseconomies of scale are likely to become more acute as a result of increasing financial difficulties over the coming years.

However, while the size of Wales creates challenges, it also provides opportunities. The Welsh Assembly Government and HEFCW have increasingly been engaged with the education research community in a close and productive dialogue about how to build research collaboration through partnership. It can be said that these discourses between academics and policymakers have become much more the 'norm' in Wales - not least because of the influence of SFRE.

The SFRE has been an important catalyst in the strengthening of relationships and improved dialogue between Government and the academic research community in Wales. The Fora have created a valuable 'space' for policymakers, practitioners and the research community in Wales to share, explore and discuss their perspectives.