

The Welsh Education Research Network

(Oct 2007-June 2008)

An Evaluation

Final Report

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June 2008

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Executive Summary

- S1. In terms of its ‘... primary intention ... to trial a funding and support structure for educational researchers in Wales that harnesses collaboration between institutions to build research capacity in an All Wales Educational Research Network’ (WERN Proposal, p1) the WERN initiative has been highly successful.
- S2. The WERN Executive Committee worked effectively as a governance structure for the initiative, with its success gained largely as a result of having representatives from all of the institutions involved. They promoted and managed the award of bursaries to eight inter-institutional collaborative groups. Initially this involved engaging 93 academics from the ten higher education institutions (HEIs) involved in the 24 bursary applications. The final eight bursaries involved 51 academics from nine institutions.
- S3. The eight bursary application topics were:
- Working lives: narratives of occupational change from further and higher education in post-devolution Wales;
 - Rural education;
 - Polish migrants’ children and education for sustainable development and global citizenship;
 - Exploring early years practitioners’ use of ‘effective’ verbal interactions in outdoor environments in Wales;
 - Perceptions of play and playfulness: implications for the implementation of the Foundation Phase in Wales;
 - An investigation of the affordances of ICT for the development of effective pedagogy in mathematics and science classrooms;
 - Learning Welsh as a second language in Key Stage 4;
 - Early years bilingualism: Welsh as a second language in the Foundation Phase.
- S4. The intention to bring on new and inexperienced researchers was successfully accomplished with 15 academics with no research experience and 12 with 1-5 years of experience joining in bursary projects with 15 researchers of 11+ years of experience.
- S5. The timescale for the initiative (October 2007 to June 2008) was a problem for all concerned and made the requirement for bursary groups to draw up proposals for a major funded research project between the beginning of January and the final report deadline of mid-May 2008 to be more or less impractical. Only one group had a well-advanced proposal by the due date and most others had only managed to do some of the groundwork. However, 11 grant proposals were underway, one grant had been won and nine paper presentations covering research from the bursary activities had

been submitted to major conferences. It should be emphasized, too, that all of the bursary groups were continuing in their proposal development work after the final report deadline of mid-May.

- S6. Most of the 37 interviewees who participated in the evaluation strongly endorsed the initiative. They responded to a specific question on their general impression of the worth of the initiative with comments such as ‘excellent’, ‘absolutely brilliant’ and ‘profound experience’. These positive comments were variously linked to the benefits afforded by collaboration, at the level of institution and at an inter-disciplinary and individual level, the personal professional learning achieved, the sense of purpose generated, the focus on Welsh issues and the high degree of commitment and support from institutions.
- S7. A small minority of ambiguous or negative views were recorded from five interviewees with comments that included: ‘Noble idea but too little, too late’, ‘a curate’s egg – potentially good but too ambitious’, ‘right idea but too rushed’ and ‘pleasing but may be too late’.
- S8. The collapse in Welsh educational research capacity is well-recognized and WERN was never formulated as a transforming ‘silver bullet’ initiative. It was planned as a pilot initiative to explore how the situation might be transformed, using a collaborative network model based around competitive small-scale bursaries. The evaluation has nevertheless shown that a degree of transformation has been inspired by WERN. For example, at least three groups were expressly intending to continue the research collaborations they had begun, regardless of whether there was a WERN II follow-on, and at least one group had almost completed a proposal for submission to the ESRC despite the short period in which they had to develop it.
- S9. Institutions contributed to an average of six applications (range 1-11) and were involved with an average of five (1-7) collaborating institutions overall. The average number of staff making applications was 9 (2-16) while the average number engaged in funded groups was 5 (0-9). The average number of funded awards, in which institutions were involved, was 2 (0-5).
- S10. Thirty-one responses were made in relation to aspects of leadership, management and administration of the overall initiative (16) and the individual projects (15). Nine interviewees enthusiastically endorsed the high quality of management and administration of the initiative overall. Comments such as ‘fantastic job’, ‘amazing’ and ‘excellent’ were used to describe the efforts of the coordinator and administrator of the initiative. A further seven interviewees described the management and administration as good, sometimes with qualifications about specific aspects such as financing.
- S11. At project level, the views expressed on bursary group leadership were of a similar kind. Leadership of the groups was considered by 10 of the 15 responding interviewees to be very good or better; two comments being ‘fab!’ and ‘excellent’. Three felt that their projects were well managed and two felt the management of their projects was average – one person claiming that they ‘felt they haven’t got anywhere’.
- S12. The role of mentors in the bursary groups was almost universally hailed as a success, with 16 of the 20 respondents on the issue paying tribute to the mentors and only four voicing a less satisfied view, e.g. ‘problematic’, ‘average’ and ‘too early to say’. The mentors were all very experienced researchers and the 16 interviewees variously considered them to have given of their time and expertise willingly and in a highly professional but unassuming and non-patronizing way. Mentors were described as ‘inspirational’, ‘insightful’, ‘fantastic’ and ‘extremely effective’. One made ‘everyone feel valued’, another ‘guided us away from blind alleys’ and another ‘kept

us grounded'. It seems reasonable to conclude that the mentoring feature of WERN was a highly successful aspect of the research capacity building.

S13. The use of the VRE (virtual research environment) was limited to more or less two groups 14 of the 21 bursary-related interviewees who responded said they did not use it at all with the remaining seven indicating that they did not use it much. It should be emphasized, however, that the lack of use of the VRE did not have any manifestly detrimental impact on the progress of the various bursary award activities, while the modest use made in a couple of instances did demonstrate that it could add value.

Recommendations

S14. In order to foster further collaboration and research capacity building, a strategic research agenda, for example identifying educational research needs over the next five years, should be drawn up by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) in consultation with the HEIs and other relevant stakeholders.

S15. Funds should be set aside for commissioning research into these topics and also for non-predetermined areas to ensure there is potential for creative, in addition to responsive, proposals from institutions. The commissioning criteria should include clear requirements for user engagement, inter-institutional collaboration, inter-disciplinarity and research capacity building. Commissioning models should include the successful bursary scheme as well as larger-scale awards. The former should be engaged for at least one more tranche to capitalize on the existing good proposals that could not be funded in the pilot initiative. Whether there are benefits to be gained from future tranches will not be determined until the final outcomes are established for the current bursaries.

S16. Building on its success in seeding research activity and capacity within a competitive yet highly collaborative framework, the WERN Executive Committee should act as the commissioning body. Its performance should be reviewed on an annual basis through a comprehensive progress report and key performance indicators of activities and outputs that can be linked to WERN. A tentative list might involve dimensions such as:

- Collaborative grant applications involving two or more institutions (with a view to geographic location, perhaps);
- Numbers and type of staff new-to-research who have become involved;
- Numbers and types of training events and the staff attending them;
- Numbers of published papers, conference presentations (particularly international conferences).

S17. Given the potential benefits of increasing institutional and national research activity, the committee should be funded by a modest subscription from each institution to facilitate meetings (and travel costs) in the three main regions: south, west and north. In addition to its commissioning and monitoring role, it should seek to provide a voice for the promotion of research capacity building and collaboration, to lobby for increased funding to support educational research, to identify strategic goals and topics for educational research in Wales, and to organize pan-Wales training events and an annual showcase event for Welsh educational research.

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Introduction

1. The Welsh Education Research Network initiative (WERN) was launched in October 2007 with joint funding totalling £150,000 from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). WERN was a designated pilot project, the essence of which was to explore a scheme of research bursaries as a means of contributing to research capacity building across 11 of the 12 higher education institutions (HEIs) of Wales (the exception was the University of Wales, Lampeter². See Appendix I for the list of participating HEIs). These collaborative research bursaries were to be a maximum of £15,000 each. The initiative was designed to end in June 2008.
2. The lead site for the initiative was Trinity College, Carmarthen. The day-to-day administration and management was based at Trinity and involved, *inter alia*, organizing collective events, providing support and advice, and administering the financial aspects of the initiative.
3. The initiative was managed by an Executive Committee, chaired by a Trinity academic, Dr Sue Davies with Dr Jane Salisbury from Cardiff University as vice-chair. Membership of the committee comprised representatives from all but one HEI in Wales (Appendix II). The Executive Committee met on a regular basis, receiving reports about the administration of the initiative and making decisions on next steps and strategy.
4. An Advisory Committee was also established to evaluate and decide upon the bursary award applications. This committee (Appendix III) comprised senior academics from a small number of Welsh, English and Scottish institutions, representatives from HEFCW and the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), and the WERN Executive Committee chair and vice-chair. Two of the academic members of the committee also represented the ESRC Training and Development Board and Research Grants Board respectively.
5. As part of the terms of the proposal, the progress and outcomes of the initiative were to be evaluated during its final stages and this report constitutes that evaluation.

The WERN Evaluation

6. The brief for the evaluation focused on five anticipated outcomes from the initiative:

‘Collaborative activity between and within institutions will have generated high quality research proposals to funding organisations or other academic outcomes.

² Lampeter do not have an Education or Education-related department.

‘Evidence of sharing and cooperating in developing research seminars and training events and attendance across institutions, thus contributing to a more positive research culture across HEIs.

‘Evidence of the potential effectiveness of a VRE to enhance collaboration to develop research proposals.

‘A test of the proposed management and governance structure.

‘A substantive commitment from constituent institutions to the development of the network.’ (WERN Proposal, p5)

7. In carrying out the evaluation, the following sources of data were analysed:

- Minutes of the WERN Executive Committee meetings;
- Minutes of the WERN Advisory Committee meetings;
- Summary details of all applications for bursary awards;
- Application forms, interim and final reports, and completed or emerging research proposals from bursary award groups;
- Interviews with members of bursary groups, bursary group leaders, the WERN management/administration team, mentors, Advisory Committee members and Executive Committee members.

The draft report was presented to the Chair of WERN for accuracy checking before final submission.

8. In general the reporting style of this evaluation offers a mix of facts, interpretations and summarized empirical data. In relation to the empirical data I either offer an interpretation or allow them to speak for themselves. In some cases I do both. In other instances I offer my opinion, generally based on an interpretation of a wider range of factors than simply the interview responses. In these cases I make the distinction clear by prefacing the comments by ‘in my view’ or some similar and conventional phrasing.

9. I have been asked to give my opinions on what should happen, if anything, post-WERN. I have considerable experience of promoting research capacity building in jurisdictions other than Wales but each situation, whether at a national or institutional level, has its own nuances, priorities, structures and aspirations. I concede, therefore, to feeling a mite uncomfortable stepping into the complex situation that exists in Wales and pronouncing on matters about which I know only what I have gleaned from the process of this evaluation. That said, I do offer recommendations in two forms – those that I consider are reasonable and important for taking matters forward, and those that the participants in my survey consider to be worthy of a capacity building wish list.

Interview Sample

10. For the empirical dimension of the evaluation, 39 interviews with various types of participants in the WERN initiative were arranged. Of these, 37 were completed. There was one no-show and another was missed as a result of difficulties on my part in making contact. Interviews were conducted in three formats: face-to-face, video-conferencing and telephone. The interviewees were selected in advance by the WERN chair, with the main criterion being availability to fit into a tightly scheduled programme. In looking at the spread of representation and reflecting on the interviews themselves, I had no sense of any bias in the selection.

11. The 37 interviewees covered 44 representative roles in the WERN initiative as set out in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Spread of representative roles among the interviewees

Group Member	Group Leader	Executive Committee	Advisory Committee	HEI Representative	Project Management	Mentor	Funding Body
14	6	11	2	6	2	2	1

12. It is worth noting at this point that the interviewees included all members of the Executive Committee, representatives from six of the 11 HEIs and six of the eight bursary group leaders.

Bursary Awards Process

13. Applications for the bursaries had been invited from academics representing two or more institutions, who planned to work together on a specified educational research context. The primary goal of each bursary was to create a high quality research proposal for submission to a major funding body by mid-May 2008. (It should be emphasized that this was a reporting deadline and that all of the bursary groups were continuing in their work on into June and beyond the official end of the initiative). Applications from 23 such groups were received in November 2007 and were evaluated and awarded in December 2007. (A 24th application was withdrawn as appropriate partners could not be found.) Eight were selected for an award and were notified at the end of December. They and the unsuccessful applicants were then invited to a training event in mid-January 2008.
14. Ten institutions contributed to the 24 applications (one institution was not able to contribute to any applications for logistic reasons). The summary data are presented in Table 2:

Table 2: Summary data on institutional applications for bursary awards

Institution	No. of Applications to which Institution has Contributed	No. of Partner Institutions Involved	No of Individual Staff Involved in Applications	No. of Individual Staff in Funded Bursary Groups	No. of Funded Bursaries in which Institution Involved	No. of Bursaries Won
Aberystwyth	1	1	10	10	1	1
Bangor	5	7	9	5	2	1
Cardiff	6	7	8 (9) ³	3	2	0
Glamorgan	7	6	9 (10)	5	3	1
NEWI	1	1	2	0	0	0
Newport	11	7	16 (19)	5	4	0
Swansea M	5	5	8 (9)	5	1	1
Swansea U	5	5	6 (12)	5 (7)	3	2
Trinity	7	6	9 (12)	9 (10)	5	2
UWIC	9	7	16 (19)	4	2	0
Totals	57	52	93 (111)	51 (54)	23	
Rounded Averages	6	5	9	5	2	
Range	1-11	1-7	2-16	0-9	0-5	0-2

15. There were 93 individual applicants across the institutions, 15 of whom were named on two applications and one of whom was named on four – giving a total of 111 named applicants across the initial 24 applications. Institutions contributed to an average of six applications and were involved with an average of five collaborating institutions overall. The average number of staff making applications was nine while the average number engaged in funded groups was five. The average number of funded awards in which institutions were involved was 2. In all cases the table also gives the range of observed values for each metric and perusal of these demonstrates that there was considerable variation among the institutions on most of the indicators.

16. The 24 bursary applications involved the following numbers of collaborating HEIs:

Table 3: Number of collaborating institutions by number of bursary applications

	No. of Collaborating Institutions			
	2	3	4	5+
No. of Applications (23*)	15	6	2	0

*A single-institution bid was withdrawn as partners could not be found for the particular topic.

17. Table 4 illustrates the high degree of inter-institutional collaboration in the 23 valid applications (excluding the partner-seeking 24th application):

Table 4: Inter-institutional collaboration on bursary applications

HEI	Aber	Bangor	Cardif f	Glam	NEWI	Newport	Swan Met	Swan U	Trinity	UWIC

³ Values in parentheses take account of individual members of staff who were involved in more than one application or bursary award. For example, 16 academics in UWIC contributed to 19 applications.

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

18. In addition three of the initial 23 applications involved academics from the universities of Sheffield, Durham and the West of England.

19. Leaving aside the two institutions that were involved in only one application each, the other eight participated in at least five collaborations and four of them were involved in seven.

Topics Covered in the Bursary Applications

20. Based on an examination of their titles, the topics proposed for bursary awards included five in the area of the recent Foundation Phase changes, three in the area of Welsh language, culture and identity, three relating to subject areas (e.g. art) and two in the area of post-compulsory education (e.g. transition from FE to work). Note that these categorizations cannot be exclusive; for example a Welsh language dimension could feature in applications that have been grouped under other headings. The remaining topics are more difficult to group and were: rural education, teacher education, head-teachers' perceptions, non-school education, community schools, well-being, networked learning, outdoor education, gender & bullying, 'Practice Paling' and global citizenship.

Funded Bursary Groups

21. In its main phase, the initiative funded eight bursary applications, which covered the topics:

- Working lives: narratives of occupational change from further and higher education in post-devolution Wales;
- Rural education;
- Polish migrants' children and education for sustainable development and global citizenship;
- Exploring early years practitioners' use of 'effective' verbal interactions in outdoor environments in Wales;
- Perceptions of play and playfulness: implications for the implementation of the Foundation Phase in Wales;
- An investigation of the affordances of ICT for the development of effective pedagogy in mathematics and science classrooms;
- Learning Welsh as a second language in Key Stage 4;

- Early years bilingualism: Welsh as a second language in the Foundation Phase.
22. These projects involved 51 individual academics (with three being named on two awards, giving a total of 54 named applicants). They involved the following numbers of collaborating HEIs:

Table 5: Number of collaborating institutions by number of awards

	No. of Collaborating Institutions		
	2	3	4
No. of Awards	3	3	2

23. Of the eight bursary groups, three had mentors from Welsh universities (two from Cardiff University and one from Swansea University) and the remaining five had mentors from outside Wales: from the universities of Durham, Birmingham and Exeter, from University College Dublin and from the Institute of Education, London.

Bursary Group Members' Research Experience

24. The breakdown of research experience among the 51 individual academics involved in bursary groups showed an even spread of experienced and inexperienced researchers:

Table 6: Range of experience (years) among bursary group members

	Years of Research Experience			
	0	1-5	6-10	11+
No. of Staff	15	12	9	15

Events to Support Capacity Building and Competence Development

25. Very few of the interviewees specifically reported seminars or training events designed to develop research capacity outside the process of working to the bursary group's objectives. However, a variety of capacity and competence-building activities within the bursary groups is worthy of particular mention. One group organized training for their members to develop their research skills in an important video analysis approach developed by the lead institution. This same group had organized a teachers' conference. Another planned to develop their members' thinking and strategy through a scoping seminar planned for later in the year. A seminar element was also part of an ESRC bid being developed by another group.
26. One innovative approach was to organize an event that doubled as a source for data collection from the participants and as a professional development opportunity for these same people. As either new or active researchers from a variety of institutions, they were taking part in a 'live' research process. Two project leaders mentioned valuable methodological inputs in sessions provided for group members by their external mentors. A group also reported on two successful nVivo training sessions to which colleagues outside the project (including PhD students) were invited. Of particular note in relation to these two events was the fact that it brought increased inter-disciplinarity to the group with the presenters coming from a health education background.

27. Events organized by the initiative itself were mentioned by many of the interviewees. A very successful training event was presented by Professor Anne Edwards (Oxford) and Paul Rouse (ESRC) in the form of a seminar on the theme of writing research grant applications. This was very well attended, with Executive Committee minutes recording an audience of 55. The event attracted 42 members of seven bursary groups, eight representatives from seven un-funded groups and five non-aligned academics who were availing of the opportunity for their own professional learning. A feedback facility for representatives of non-funded groups was available from a member of the Advisory Committee (Professor Richard Daugherty) and seven of the eight present took this opportunity. 'Indicators of success' for the event were recorded as including the high attendance, the nature of the questions posed to the presenters and the degree of interaction generally throughout the event.
28. A colloquium event involving WERN and Welsh TLRP (Teaching and Learning Research Programme) participants also proved very successful. A total of 76 participants attended with representation from ten institutions, including members from all funded bursary groups and some unfunded groups. Of those present, 31% completed evaluation forms. Levels of satisfaction with the event were high with 84% of respondents rating the event as good or excellent. Delegates commented on the positive atmosphere, and the feeling of a research community that was growing as a result of WERN activity. The opportunities for collaboration and networking were most frequently commented upon, although some participants expressed the view that a longer time should have been made available for the bursary groups to make their presentations.
29. A finance-related seminar (at Aberystwyth) was also regarded as important in providing an overview of funding sources, and the details of Full Economic Costing, but it was not considered by the few respondents who commented upon it to have addressed the coming to grips with the financial elements of the bursary activities. Disappointment was expressed by some interviewees that they had been forced to miss the event because of they were unable to arrange attendance at short notice. In the event only seven people attended, four of them from the same institution. The difficulties in relation to the notice given may have arisen from a change of date for the event and the minutes of an Executive Committee held prior to the event show that an attendance as low as five was expected.

Progress of Bursary Groups against Their Objectives

30. Six group leaders reported on the progress in achieving the proposed outcomes of their projects and the data is broken down in Table 7 as follows:

Table 7: Bursary group outcomes

Grant Awarded	Grant Proposals Underway	Proposals Almost Complete (by September)	Conference Papers Submitted	Journal Articles Underway	Applications for Studentship
1	11	5	9	3	1

31. One group enjoyed early success by winning a substantial award (£19K) from Becta that would further develop their pioneering development of video-analysis approaches. It would seem clear that this success was largely due to the high number of very experienced researchers involved in the group (seven with more than 10 years of research experience). A proposal from another group for a studentship in the area of Welsh language was commended but was not funded. The vitality of the groups in the

context of striving for research funding is perhaps indicated by there being more applications (11) than groups (8).

32. Five groups had ESRC grant applications in various stages of development but only one group was close to completion. Several bids were being focused on alternative sources of funding including the Higher Education Academy, the Joy Welch Educational Foundation, the Leadership Foundation and in one case, the institution's own research development fund. The evaluation brief sought explanations as to why any groups had not achieved the objective of having an ESRC (or equivalent quality) grant proposal ready by the end of the bursary funding period. There may have been many secondary issues affecting such a situation but without any shadow of a doubt, the primary reason was the inadequate time available to do it. Nevertheless, it is important to note that all of the development work in all of the bursary groups is continuing well beyond the initiative's end date (June 2008).
33. Significant outcomes were registered for a number of the groups including the submission of abstracts for work to be presented at major conferences. Paper presentations had already been accepted or were in process for the annual conferences (2008) of ECER (European Conference on Educational Research, Gothenburg, x3 abstracts), ICME (International Congress of Mathematics Education, Monterrey, Mexico), BPS (British Psychological Society, Dublin), BERA (British Educational Research Association, Edinburgh), SERA (Scottish Educational Research Association, Perth), SRHE (Society for Research into Higher Education, Liverpool) and IPED (Inquiring Pedagogies, Coventry). In my view this is a particularly noteworthy achievement of WERN; that is, nine presentations (should the abstracts all be accepted) of aspects of educational research in Wales that would simply not have existed without the activities of WERN.
34. Across the initiative itself, three collective outcomes are also worthy of note: a special issue of the Welsh Journal of Education that will include papers from the initiative, a keynote symposium at BERA (accepted) in which the WERN initiative will be presented, and a WERN input to a 'Celtic Connections' research capacity building conference at the University of Ulster.

Using the Virtual Research Environment (VRE)

35. The TLRP links to the initiative were important in a number of ways including acting as a source of contacts and support for the management team. In particular, TLRP provided and hosted a VRE (virtual research environment) for the bursary projects. Overall however a very limited range of VRE facilities was actually used. For example, each bursary group was given a workspace to enable members to engage in collaborative writing, discussion forums, blogs and wikis. The initiative overall also had VRE space but used it primarily – and usefully – to store resources ranging from FAQs about bursary applications to PowerPoint presentations from the training and support events.
36. Only two projects appeared to have used the VRE to any significant extent. One group leader reported using it to enable different parts of a literature review to be shared and then combined in a collaborative writing context. The VRE was also used as a vehicle for sharing anonymized data and PowerPoint presentations from bursary group activities. A second group leader reported using the VRE more or less as a repository with some 100 resource texts available to the members of the group.
37. Nevertheless the story overall was of a disappointing uptake, and this situation was recognized in by the Executive Committee in at least two of their meetings. The interviews revealed the scale of the matter. Fourteen of the 21 interviewees who

responded in relation to the VRE said they did not use it at all, and the remaining seven indicated that they did not use it much. It should be emphasized, however, that the lack of use of the VRE did not have any manifestly detrimental impact on the progress of the various bursary award activities, while the modest use made in a couple of instances did demonstrate that it could add value.

Management and Governance

38. The WERN initiative arguably differs in governance structure from, say, the NCRM network in at least one key dimension. The underlying ethos of WERN was to create a pan-Wales network of HEIs engaged in educational research, with WERN providing coordination, administration and management. NCRM, conversely, is described as being based upon a hub & node or hub & spoke design, i.e. with the University of Southampton at the centre (hub) coordinating the six nodes in the pursuit of the centre's (NCRM's) goals. The operational level of WERN is also a hub & node structure in the sense in which the lead sites for the bursary activities coordinate colleagues from other HEIs in the pursuit of the bursary goals. Therefore the distinguishing feature of WERN is its top-level collective and inclusive governance, through an executive committee that has representatives from every institution – more a network collaboration than a centre-periphery coordination (or control).
39. As its name suggests, the committee played an executive role: reviewing progress, making decisions and planning future strategy. This was a particular strength of WERN as the responsibility/authority axes did not therefore lie in one place, for example in a Cardiff hub, which perhaps otherwise would have been an obvious choice for coordinating and facilitating research capacity building across the nation's institutions. Not the least of the Cardiff attractions for such a role would be the expertise and training events available through its NCRM Quality node, but it is probably fair to say that as a UK-focused centre (by remit), it is arguably less used by researchers from Welsh institutions (especially in the north and west) and some evidence for this was heard in several interviews.
40. Another strength of the WERN executive committee-type governance, and clearly differentiated from the potential strengths of a high-expertise hub, was that by the very nature of its inclusiveness and representativeness, it played a formative and support role in relation to each member's own institution and colleagues. Outside of this, it also played an ambassadorial role in the community more generally through interaction with HEI heads, WAG and HEFCW etc.

Challenges and Tensions for the WERN Executive Committee

41. These observations having been made, it was also clear that various members of the Executive Committee experienced tensions in their role, with challenges at a number of levels. For example, many were acutely aware of a tension between the drive to create a collaborative network and operating a competitive process for awarding bursaries within that network. The 'winners and losers' situation prompted at least two members to muse with hindsight, but it must be said with not a great deal of conviction, on the possibility that it might have been better to give an allocation of funds to each constituent institution for research development.
42. This tension hints at the considerable problems that judging the 24 applications might have brought to the Executive Committee table – making the establishment of the independent Advisory Committee a most sensible decision. All the evidence at my disposal suggests that the process undertaken by the Advisory Committee was scrupulous and objective, based on a quasi-scientific analysis of the applications

according to four criterial areas. These were the potential for building research capacity, the quality of the proposal, the appropriateness of the mentorship and institutional support, and the ‘potentiality’ of the proposal, e.g. relevance to Wales and the likelihood of the subsequent research proposal to attract funding. It is clear to me that the competitiveness of the process, however jarring within a nascent collaborative context, was an important and enhancing feature for the initiative. It not only reflected the competitiveness of funded research outside of WERN, it sharpened the focus on the potential for collaborative working to produce quality proposals.

43. The 1-in-3 ‘hit rate’ (eight successful applications from 24) clearly left more people disappointed than celebratory. Concerns were recorded at Executive Committee meetings that ways should be found to recognize and capitalize on the efforts made and the momentum for research developments generated. These concerns were clearly well-founded with two institutions contributing to 11 and 9 applications respectively but ending up with no bursary awards (see Table 2). It should not be assumed, however, that all of the proposals made by the various institutions were of sufficient quality for awarding a bursary. Some undoubtedly were but sufficient funds were not available for them. Others were some way off being acceptable and, for example, displayed no knowledge of any relevant literature. Direct feedback was offered to all unsuccessful groups through the good offices of a member of the Advisory Committee and to all accounts this was much appreciated.
44. Discussion in the Executive Committee centred on how to provide unsuccessful bidders with support to help them maintain interest and momentum in the development of their research activities. Ideas included a designated training event, perhaps under the auspices of the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) and its Quality node at Cardiff, and inclusive (bursary-funded and non-funded participants) training events on topics such as project management. All unsuccessful and successful applicants were approached to ask for suggestions on addressing the training and support that they felt they needed but no replies were received. Nevertheless, the committee felt the issue was very important and it was subsequently decided that all unsuccessful applicants would be invited to all activities.
45. Another tension, felt strongly by members of the Executive Committee, related to the time available for achieving the initiative’s goals. Almost to a person during the whole range of interviews, and in almost all of the interim and final reports, there was a strongly held view that the time-frame of the initiative was too short for its breadth of aspirations to be achieved. One lone voice (an HEI representative without a bursary group role) felt that the short time-frame was not entirely detrimental, suggesting that it focused attention on the collaborations and that the consequent pace of activity ensured the various projects did not ramble.
46. Two members of the Executive Committee certainly complained about the number of meetings they had to attend but in terms of their responsibility to deliver on the goals of the initiative, the committee members arguably felt the burden of time more acutely than most others in the initiative (with the exception, perhaps, of bursary group leaders). Railed against from all quarters, not least colleagues in their own institutions, about the perceived impossibility of preparing a fully-fledged grant application by the mid-May deadline (a date set for final reports), they nevertheless had to ensure that they guided the initiative to as successful a conclusion as possible. Without taking away from the efforts of the bursary groups themselves, it is to the Executive Committee’s considerable credit that much was achieved despite the very tight time-frame.

Leadership, Management, Administration and Mentoring

47. Thirty-one responses were made in relation to aspects of leadership, management and administration of the overall initiative (16) and the individual projects (15). Nine interviewees enthusiastically endorsed the high quality of management and administration of the initiative overall. Comments such as ‘fantastic job’, ‘amazing’ and ‘excellent’ were used to describe the efforts of the coordinator and administrator of the initiative. A further seven interviewees described the management and administration as good, sometimes with qualifications about specific aspects such as financing. Key to all of these positive sentiments appears to have been the combination of the supportive and non-directive tenor of the approach taken by the chair, vice-chair and administrator, their widely recognized and motivational enthusiasm and passion, and their much appreciated industry and endeavour in making the initiative work.
48. At project level, the views expressed on bursary group leadership were of a similar kind. The 15 respondents in this context comprised the 14 members of groups and one executive committee member who was also a member of a group. Leadership of the groups was considered by 10 of the interviewees to be very good or better; two comments being ‘fab!’ and ‘excellent’. Three felt that their projects were well managed and two felt the management of their projects was average – one person claiming that they ‘felt they haven’t got anywhere’. In all cases, the members spoke of highly inclusive processes, stimulating discourse on the group topics and, for all of the members new to research, a highly structured and purposeful introduction to a new and important dimension to their professional work.
49. The role of mentors in the bursary groups was almost universally hailed as a success, with 16 of the 20 respondents on the issue paying tribute to the mentors and only four voicing a less satisfied view, e.g. ‘problematic’, ‘average’ and ‘too early to say’. The mentors were all very experienced researchers and the 16 interviewees variously considered them to have given of their time and expertise willingly and in a highly professional but unassuming and non-patronizing way. Mentors were described as ‘inspirational’, ‘insightful’, ‘fantastic’ and ‘extremely effective’. One made ‘everyone feel valued’, another ‘guided us away from blind alleys’ and another ‘kept us grounded’. It seems reasonable to conclude that the mentoring aspect of WERN was a highly successful aspect of the research capacity building.

Views on the Worth of the Initiative

50. Most of the 37 interviewees who participated in the evaluation strongly endorsed the initiative. They responded to a specific question on their general impression of the worth of the initiative, as follows in Table 8:

Table 8: Summary of general impressions of the WERN initiative

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Ambiguous or Negative
6	17	9	5

51. Comments associated with an ‘Excellent’ impression were effusive and included ‘absolutely brilliant’ and ‘profound experience’ while those associated with a ‘Very Good’ impression included: ‘extremely valuable’, ‘innovative’, ‘far-sighted’, ‘contemporary’, ‘very impressed’ and ‘timely’. More circumspect ‘Good’ category comments included: ‘on the

whole positive’ and ‘doing well’. These positive comments were variously linked to the benefits afforded by collaboration, at the level of institution and at an inter-disciplinary and individual level, the personal professional learning achieved, the sense of purpose generated, the focus on Welsh issues and the high degree of commitment and support from institutions.

52. Although a small minority, those who were more ambiguous or even negative in their views on the initiative made a number of important points in what might otherwise be perceived as potentially defeatist or cynical comments. The comments included: ‘noble idea but too little, too late’, ‘a curate’s egg – potentially good but too ambitious’, ‘right idea but too rushed’ and ‘pleasing but may be too late’.
53. A more thoughtful analysis along negative lines came through one group member’s reflections in an interim report and is worth repeating here:
- ‘My main concern about WERN is that the timescale and resource is not really adequate to achieve the inherent objective of securing further (more sustainable and large-scale) research funding for several reasons:
- ‘(a) most WERN collaborations are new, therefore there is a great deal of work to be done in just getting to know one another;
- ‘(b) the funds and timescale really only allow for a limited amount of scoping work to be done before starting to prepare research proposals;
- ‘(c) the timescale of WERN is unlikely to allow good research proposals to be developed that have an improved chance of being funded; and
- ‘(d) WERN has clearly demonstrated to me that there is very limited research capacity currently in Wales - there is some potential for increasing that capacity but that is going to be incredibly hard to release/realize and will take a lot more than WERN to achieve.’
54. There is an element of stating the obvious here (viz. the inadequate time-frame, recognized by all, and the modest funding) but some of the fundamental steps determining the rate of progress are identified clearly. The author of the comments (anonymous to me), was speaking from the context of one bursary group (though not speaking *about* that bursary group) but clearly captured some of the main challenges facing all groups. These challenges ultimately led to many of them deciding that the objective of developing a high quality proposal for funded research could not be achieved in the time and with the resources involved. Their response to this early realization was to concentrate specifically on the team building ((a) above), the scoping of the research area (b) and the decision not to rush the proposal (c). In effect, most bursary groups addressed the potential obstructions with considerable energy and from early in their activities.
55. Comment (d) is perhaps less insightful. The collapse in Welsh educational research capacity is well-recognized and WERN was never formulated as a transforming ‘silver bullet’ initiative. It was planned as a pilot initiative to explore how the situation might be transformed, using a collaborative network model based around competitive small-scale bursaries. The evaluation has nevertheless shown that a degree of transformation has been inspired by WERN. For example, at least three groups were expressly intending to continue the research collaborations they had begun, regardless of whether there was a WERN II follow-on, and at least one group had almost completed a proposal for submission to the ESRC despite the short period in which they had to develop it.

Collaboration

56. Thirty-four of the interviewees commended the various collaborative opportunities prompted by the initiative. Comments included: ‘a classic and successful example of collaborative activity’, ‘... flushed out people working in educational research’ and ‘the seeds sown among many new and inexperienced researchers’.
57. The expressed views of at least three bursary group leaders, that the collaborations had momentum and that it was the intention to continue the work after WERN, was also testimony to the gelling of intellectual and practical engagement in the new research contexts. It would be difficult not to conclude, on the basis of these interviews, that the distributed leadership of the bursary groups was other than highly successful in cultivating and sustaining collegiality and collaboration between the institutions involved.
58. At the time of the interviews, however, one issue was threatening to unravel some of the gains made in inter-institutional and group collegiality. Arising from discussions at the colloquium, three group reports recorded concerns about the possibility that the inclusion of inexperienced researchers as co-applicants would jeopardize the prospects of the final ESRC proposal. This issue exercised a number of the participants (5) and had emerged after the colloquium. However, it seemed to me that the issue was being misunderstood.
59. The people concerned were very experienced in school and practitioner contexts. If the proposal was relying on their research experience, then it would seem reasonable to assume that their weakness in this area would be detrimental and that it would be unwise to name them as co-applicants. Why would ESRC reviewers recommend investment in researchers with little or no experience? However, their membership in the bursary groups, as stated clearly in the interviews, was based largely on their expertise and experience in the practitioner context. Yes, they were also taking part in their groups in order to develop their research skills. But it would seem equally reasonable to assume that if practitioner expertise was needed in pursuit of the project’s goals, their inclusion would be nothing to do with loyalty and collegiality but would be a matter of necessity to ensure that the proposing team had the requisite mix of expertise to deliver on the proposal’s objectives. Why would ESRC reviewers recommend investment in a project which required practitioner expertise but did not have it? Naming them within an application as opposed to according them co-applicant status may be a viable compromise but the implications for inclusiveness and equity of treatment for people who have contributed much to the proposal planning and writing would remain.
60. At the time of writing I do not know if this matter is resolved but clearly it has considerable implications for the future investment of time and expertise by emerging researchers and their institutions. It is also clear that the whole concept of collaborative research capacity building could be threatened if such researchers are routinely restricted from being co-applicants or routinely banished to the role of supporting team members within the text.

Reasons for Participating in WERN

61. A variety of reasons for participating in the WERN initiative was provided by 30 of the interviewees. There was an element (five mentions) of being the natural (and willingly accepted) choice of an institution because of their role (e.g. director of research) or being invited by those putting bursary applications together (6). Personal professional reasons tended to be important; some of them related, it can safely be assumed, to saying ‘Yes’ to an invitation. The top reason was having an interest in the topic of the proposed research (11). Seven participants spoke of their interest in collaborating with colleagues from other institutions while other reasons included the desire to better inform their

teaching through research (4), to be research active (4) and to develop a wider repertoire of research methods (3). In at least seven instances, participants spoke about their strong desire to contribute to the rejuvenation of educational research in Wales.

Personal Professional Learning

62. Follow-up reflections on personal professional learning, resulting from bursary group activity, were also recorded from 26 interviewees. Prime among the gains were improved methodological knowledge and practice. The 15 mentions in this respect covered imagery methods, video analysis, various new-to-the-person methods for data collection and analysis (e.g. interviews, nVivo and focus groups), and how to work with teachers in the context of research. Six participants mentioned new skills in writing research bids while others pointed to gains relating to using a VRE (4), learning from other disciplines (4), project management (3), learning about a new field (3) and in-depth reading within a topic (2). Learning from mentors and working with other institutions featured for five participants each. Singular mentions were made of improved Welsh language competence, making research presentations (in this instance at the colloquium) and generally improved self-confidence in the research context. Four interviewees spoke of an improved knowledge of Welsh academic politics and institutions.

Institutional Support and Commitment

63. Institutional support was universally reported as positive and generous and support for both the objectives of WERN and WERN itself was strongly expressed by the HEI representatives who were interviewed. Executive Committee minutes, interim and final bursary group reports and comments made by the HEI representatives pointed to considerable impact, sometimes described as great interest and sometimes as 'excitement' in institutions and their relevant departments. The disappointment of not being awarded a bursary may have coloured the impact of WERN somewhat but all of the groups represented (HEIs, bursary group members etc) registered a sense of hope and pleasure that something was being done to try to reverse the collapse of educational research across Wales.

64. However, strains did exist in institutions and were becoming more of a problem as time went on. A small number of interviewees (7) spoke of difficulties in making contributions in the context of full teaching timetables, and arrangements for buying out teaching were not always successful. Several interviewees explained that one reason for this was the difficulty in finding a suitable substitute for the specialisms of some of the lecturers involved. At least two interviewees, who held research leadership roles in their institutions, mentioned a degree of pressure being placed upon them as the amount of WERN work was perceived to affect the time given over to their normal responsibilities.

65. The following comments illustrate some of the tensions that existed:

- 'Nobody had a gap in their workload that WERN came along to fill ...'
- 'The short timescales were difficult to manage against a high teaching load ...'
- 'The institution is very supportive but you need to create your own time resources ...'
- 'The institution's investment is good but it is short-term – staff time has not been adequately covered with the funds available ...'
- 'There are problems with the financial aspects as it is unclear how the WERN money will be used when staff were not actually substituted ...'

- ‘Too much ‘gift’ time – the time that was funded did not come close to the actual time given ...’
- ‘Would like to see more support for and from the institutions ...’

66. There was a clear dilemma for the HEI representatives interviewed, namely: how long could the institution continue to facilitate and subsidize the WERN activities before they had to call a halt? Foremost in their minds was the prospect of ultimately drawing in research income but in the teaching intensive institutions, i.e. the large majority, the squeeze on teaching time was becoming more uncomfortable and less manageable for both the institution and the staff involved.

Post-WERN

67. There is a sense of unfinished business across the WERN initiative, arising partly from the bursary groups having had insufficient time to complete their programmes of work and partly from WERN, as a pilot initiative, being perceived as the beginning of something bigger. To this latter end, the Executive Committee had submitted a bid for the Welsh Assembly Government’s recent three year, £1.5 million boost for educational research. This had been unsuccessful and I recorded considerable disappointment and in some cases frustration and disbelief that WERN had not been selected, despite having a positive profile at the highest levels in institutional and government circles, and in HEFCW.

68. The views on the WAG developments arose in the context of my inquiries into the Executive Committee’s planning for and attention to sustainability for WERN itself and its activities. It was clear that many of the participants, especially the Executive Committee members, HEI representatives and bursary group leaders, had more or less assumed there would be a WERN II, especially with the prospect of the major injection of funds by the government. There were many instances of this expectation in the interviewees’ comments and in the minutes of meetings, with phrases such as ‘the next time’ and ‘the next phase’ appearing here and there. One context for these was the concerns expressed about finding ways to harness the enthusiasm of the initial stages of WERN when 93 academics had contributed to the 24 bursary applications. As a result of the 1-in-3 hit rate, four of the 10 institutions did not win an award and 42 of the original applicants did not participate further (though eight did attend the first training event where feedback on unsuccessful bids was provided). At least nine of the interviewees expressed a hope for a WERN II to enable more academic colleagues to avail of the opportunity to engage in research.

69. The prevailing view held that the WAG decision had precluded any prospect of follow-on funding to develop the collaborative model of the WERN initiative. However, cooler heads, if I may put it like that, and particularly several with considerable influence, had not ruled out a role for WERN or a WERN-type model being adopted as part of the developments over the next several years in educational research in Wales. They pointed to a criterion on collaboration being a part of the WAG specification and to the fact that the process had only reached ‘preferred bidder’ status, without the specific detail of the proposed programme being released. The prospect of further developments relating to the WAG funds and some role for WERN therefore remained open.

Magic Wands – Participants’ Recommendations for Post-WERN

70. When asked to project what they would like to see happen in the future, the interviewees offered a considerable array of ideas. These constitute a wish list but I have re-

configured them below as participant recommendations with the number of people mentioning them in parentheses.

1. Give others the same opportunity with a new phase of WERN (9) by, for example, re-directing the £1.5 million WAG funds and setting up a WERN II (3)
2. Solve the problem of staff time in teaching intensive institutions through dedicated funding from WAG, HEFCW, HEIs etc (7). One idea in this context was to maintain a panel of experienced substitutes to cover teaching for staff new to research.
3. Have an annual colloquium-style event to keep awareness of educational research high by showcasing Welsh-based research (4). One idea here was to develop a research promotion 'road show' to go around institutions as a focus for professional development.
4. Constitute and maintain a panel of mentors to support initiatives throughout the HEIs (3).
5. Continue to develop the WERN network in order to bring more colleagues in and ensure that existing collaborations are not dissipated (3).
6. Have sustained recognition by WAG and HEFCW that educational research needs to be developed (2).
7. Explore the impending teacher education re-configuration as an avenue for educational research development (2).
8. Reduce the number of institutions to consolidate educational research activity.
9. Capitalize on the 'hot-house' area of Welsh language within European and international language contexts.
10. Change the membership of the Executive Committee to increase the influence it has on institutions.
11. Weaken the barriers of competition between institutions in order to promote collaboration.
12. Have WAG identify the top 10 topics in Wales needing research, and the funds to address them.

My Recommendations

71. The following represent what I consider to be immediate priorities arising from the evaluation:
 1. In order to foster further collaboration and research capacity building, a strategic research agenda, for example identifying educational research needs over the next five years, should be drawn up by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) in consultation with the HEIs and other relevant stakeholders.
 2. Funds should be set aside for commissioning research into these topics and also for non-predetermined areas to ensure there is potential for creative, in addition to responsive, proposals from institutions. The commissioning criteria should include clear requirements for user engagement, inter-institutional collaboration, inter-disciplinarity and research capacity building. Commissioning models should include the successful bursary scheme as well as larger-scale awards. The former should be engaged for at least one more tranche to capitalize on the existing good proposals that could not be funded in the pilot initiative. Whether there are benefits to be gained from future tranches will not be determined until the final outcomes are established for the current bursaries.

3. Building on its success in seeding research activity and capacity within a competitive yet highly collaborative framework, the WERN Executive Committee should act as the commissioning body. Its performance should be reviewed on an annual basis through a comprehensive progress report and key performance indicators of activities and outputs that can be linked to WERN. A tentative list might involve dimensions such as:
 - Collaborative grant applications involving two or more institutions (with a view to geographic location, perhaps);
 - Numbers and type of staff new-to-research who have become involved;
 - Numbers and types of training events and the staff attending them;
 - Numbers of published papers, conference presentations (particularly international conferences).
4. Given the potential benefits of increasing institutional and national research activity, the committee should be funded by a modest subscription from each institution to facilitate meetings (and travel costs) in the three main regions: south, west and north. In addition to its commissioning and monitoring role, it should seek to provide a voice for the promotion of research capacity building and collaboration, to lobby for increased funding to support educational research, to identify strategic goals and topics for educational research in Wales, and to organize pan-Wales training events and an annual showcase event for Welsh educational research.

John Gardner

June 2008

Appendix I

Higher Education Institutions in Wales Involved in the WERN Initiative

Aberystwyth University

Bangor University

Cardiff University

University of Glamorgan

North-East Wales Institute of Higher Education (NEWI)

Open University, Wales

Swansea Metropolitan University

Swansea University

Trinity College, Carmarthen

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC)

University of Wales, Newport

Appendix II

Membership of the WERN Executive Committee

Professor Patrick Costello	North East Wales Institute (NEWI)
Rosemary Dale	The Open University in Wales
Dr. Sue Davies	Trinity College, Carmarthen
Dr. Janet Laugharne	University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC)
Dr Gwyn Lewis	Bangor University
Dr. David Longman	University of Wales, Newport
Professor Tricia Maynard	Swansea University
Dr Jane Salisbury	Cardiff University
Dr. Howard Tanner	Swansea Metropolitan University
Dr Malcolm Thomas	Aberystwyth University
Professor David Turner	University of Glamorgan
In attendance: Fiona Thomas	Trinity College, Carmarthen

Appendix III

Membership of the WERN Advisory Committee

Professor Emeritus Richard Daugherty	Aberystwyth University (Associate Professor - Cardiff University)
Dr Sue Davies	Trinity College, Carmarthen
Professor John Field	Stirling University
Professor John Furlong	University of Oxford
Celia Hunt	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)
Professor Marilyn Martin Jones	University of Birmingham
Haydn Llewellyn	General Teaching Council for Wales (GTCW)
Alison Rees	Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS), Welsh Assembly Government (WAG)
Dr Jane Salisbury	Cardiff University
Professor Emeritus Gareth Thomas	Swansea Metropolitan University
In attendance: Fiona Thomas	Trinity College, Carmarthen