

THE FUTURE OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN WALES

CONFERENCE REPORT



ABOUT BERA

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is the home of educational research in the United Kingdom. We are a membership association committed to advancing knowledge of education by sustaining a strong and high quality educational research community.

Together with our members, BERA is working to:

- advance research quality
- build research capacity
- foster research engagement.

Since its inception in 1974, BERA has expanded into an internationally renowned association with both UK and non-UK based members. It strives to be inclusive of the diversity of educational research and scholarship, and welcomes members from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, theoretical orientations, methodological approaches, sectoral interests and institutional affiliations. It also encourages the development of productive relationships with other associations within and beyond the UK.

Aspiring to be the home of all educational researchers in the UK, BERA provides opportunities for everyone active in this field to contribute through its portfolio of distinguished publications, its world-class conference and other events, and its active peer community, organised around 30 special interest groups. We also recognise excellence in educational research through our range of awards. In addition to our member-focussed activity, we aim to inform the development of policy and practice by promoting the best quality evidence produced by educational research.

This document presents the proceedings, presentations and findings of the conference, The Future of Educational Research in Wales, which took place in the Jurys Inn hotel, Cardiff, on 14 November 2018, held jointly by BERA and the Welsh Government. While every effort has been made to accurately summarise and represent participants' contributions, responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies lies solely with BERA. Any enquiries should be directed to publications@bera.ac.uk.

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Published in March 2019 by the British Educational Research Association

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British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2019). *The Future of Educational Research in Wales*. London. Retrieved from: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/the-future-of-educational-research-in-wales>

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ABOUT THE FUTURE OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN WALES CONFERENCE

The Future of Educational Research in Wales conference took place in the Jurys Inn hotel, Cardiff, on 14 November 2018. Held jointly by the Welsh Government and the British Educational Research Association (BERA), it was intended to provide a platform for the education community in Wales to discuss and share ideas about opportunities for research and evidence-informed practice in the education system in Wales as it undergoes an ambitious programme of reform.

The event was filled to capacity with 200 teachers, researchers and education stakeholders keen to showcase and discuss educational research in Wales, to contribute to discussions about how evidence can shape classroom practice, and to build constructive partnerships.

By distilling and documenting the ideas and opinions of speakers and attendees, this report presents an account of the past, present and future of educational research and research-informed practice in Wales. For a full suite of resources arising from the conference – including full audio of the day's events, key presentations in Welsh and English and an online poster exhibition – see the BERA website.¹

The day's programme, much of which is reflected in the structure and content of this document, is included on the following page.

BERA and the Welsh Government extend their deepest thanks to all speakers, delegates and poster presenters for their valuable contributions to this event and, through it, to the future of educational research in Wales.



¹ bera.ac.uk/event/14-11

Programme

- 09:00 | Registration, refreshments and poster exhibition**
- 09:50 | Welcome and introductions**
Professor David James, Cardiff University
- 10.00 | Harnessing research to practice: What international evidence suggest will make a practical difference in Wales?**
Philippa Cordingley, the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE)
- 10.30 | Panel discussion**
Eithne Hughes OBE, Ysgol Bryn Eliau; Dr Kevin Smith, Cardiff University; Dr Rachel Bowen, CollegesWales; Dr Kevin Palmer, Welsh Government
- 11.20 | Chair's commentary**
Professor David James, Cardiff University
- 11.30 | Cabinet Secretary's address**
Kirsty Williams AM, Cabinet Secretary for Education²
- 12.00 | Poster session³**
- 13.30 | Close-to-practice research: What is it, and how can its quality be improved?**
Professor Dominic Wyse, UCL Institute of Education
Professor Chris Brown, University of Portsmouth
- 14.00 | Parallel cross-sector discussion groups**
Facilitators:
Professor Gary Beauchamp, Cardiff Metropolitan University
Dr Andrew Davies, Aberystwyth University
Professor Alma Harris, Swansea University
Lisa Taylor, University of South Wales
Professor Enlli Thomas, Bangor University
Dr Jane Waters, University of Wales Trinity Saint David
- 15.00 | Plenary debate on the strategic direction of educational research in Wales**
Chairs: Professor Sally Power, Cardiff University and Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD); Professor John Gardner, University of Stirling
- 16.00 | Networking reception**
- 17.00 | Close of event**

² Since December 2018, Kirsty Williams has been Minister for Education in the Welsh Government. However, in this report she is referred to by her title at the time of the conference, which was Cabinet Secretary for Education.

³ Posters and other resources from the conference can be found at www.bera.ac.uk/event/14-11.

FOREWORD

A STATEMENT FROM THE WELSH GOVERNMENT



This conference represented a milestone in our journey towards co-creating a vision for educational research in Wales. The discussions at the conference, alongside the evidence gathered through the Welsh Government's Evidence Informed Practice and Education Research Task and Finish Group demonstrated that there is enthusiasm and appetite across the education community to join us on this journey and to work in collaboration to strengthen educational research capacity in Wales. The participation of delegates in this event has been incredibly helpful in identifying how we can build on our current research capacity and ensure that it contributes to improvements in practice and the success and wellbeing of our learners.

We want to ensure there is a structure in place that makes the best use of resources by co-ordinating and encouraging the production of research and making it visible and accessible to all in order to help develop knowledge and expertise. We will support and capitalise on the evident enthusiasm for jointly identifying research priorities and collaboration between schools, higher education institutions and other partners. The Welsh Government is committed to developing a National Educational Research Strategy, and we will be engaging with all relevant stakeholders in this process to ensure that it meets the needs of the system and that we all understand our roles and responsibilities in delivering it.

We do not want evidence-informed practice to be seen as another 'initiative' or burden for our busy teachers. Instead, we believe that many of the levers are already in place to support this as part of routine practice (for example, the Professional Teaching and Leadership Standards, the Schools as Learning Organisations model and the National Approach to Professional Learning). The focus during the development of the National Strategy for Educational Research will be on working with our partners to develop clarity on what evidence-informed practice might mean in practice, how we can support it and what the ultimate outcome should be.

The Welsh Government has developed a distinctive reform agenda that needs to be supported by the best evidence available. Continually learning and developing will help us to make robust decisions. The need for educational research has increased since devolution, but it has not

been matched by an increase in education research capacity. Discussions at the conference helped us understand the challenges and opportunities we need to address as we build this capacity. The Welsh Government will be undertaking further development work on where and how any future investment in educational research capacity will be best placed. We want to see growth in the scale, scope, quality and use of educational research in Wales, and this will be the aim of the forthcoming National Strategy for Educational Research. It will be essential to supporting our vision of a self-improving system, and to achieving Our National Mission for education.

Dr Kevin Palmer

Deputy Director, Pedagogy, Leadership and Professional Learning,
Welsh Government





1. RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

1.1 Introduction

Professor David James, Cardiff University



Professor James highlighted the fact that the money spent on educational research, particularly research directly related to practice and policy, is rather small relative to other areas of society and the economy. Given the number of lives that education touches and improves – and the many professionals working to provide and improve it – it should be accorded higher priority. However, Professor James stated that since resources are constrained it is vital that the education community talks about and achieves clarity about what problems need to be overcome and what it wants its future to look like. He proposed that the conference define its shared objectives for the day as being to explore relationships between research, policy and practice, and to celebrate what has been achieved and what is done well while also addressing shortcomings. Most important was the need to shape an agenda for the future.

1.2 Harnessing research to practice: What international evidence suggests will make a practical difference in Wales

*Philippa Cordingley,
Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE)*



Philippa Cordingley discussed the findings of a 'systematic review of systematic reviews' of the available evidence on teachers' continuing professional development and learning, focussing specifically on practitioner use of research, and on what makes the difference to pupils as well as to teachers.⁴ This review, commissioned by BERA and undertaken by CUREE with colleagues from Durham University and the Institute of Education, found that engaging in and with research can feed, deeply, into pupils' success, but deep specialist expertise is required for sustained learning that makes a real difference. This expertise must be underpinned by

⁴ This presentation is available in both Welsh and English at bera.ac.uk/event/14-11, as are other presentations and materials from, and audio files of, the entire day's proceedings.

evidence, which needs to be presented to practitioners in forms that are easy to operationalise to help them navigate complexity and engage in critical reflection. However, teachers' engagement in research tends to be 'for Christmas' rather than 'for life' – despite the fact that engaging with research to inform practice was a habit that all attendees to the conference were dedicated to pursuing. She suggested that practitioners need both high-level summaries of systematic research and high-quality qualitative and quantitative classroom-level studies that demonstrate the implications of context.

Philippa outlined her work, with Eithne Hughes, to create a programme for building school-led capacity and policy to promote research and evidence-informed practice across GwE,⁵ supporting Challenge Advisers and subject leads to use research and to conduct, and coach others to conduct, micro-enquiries. Drawing from systematic reviews about challenge and feedback, they had organised research resources in series of cumulative 'stepping stones', from digests to fuller illustrated overviews. Philippa emphasised the importance of engaging practitioners in conversations about their learning that focus on how pupils respond to their putting it into practice.

1.3 Panel discussion

Eithne Hughes OBE, Ysgol Bryn Eliau
Dr Kevin Smith, Cardiff University
Dr Rachel Bowen, CollegesWales
Dr Kevin Palmer, Welsh Government

Eithne Hughes discussed her work with Philippa Cordingley and CUREE (see above), and how it helped to systematise the research undertaken within her school and to give it breadth, depth and life. She outlined her school's approach to funding research projects: it aims to have impact for small groups of pupils but, in the interests of learning, has a no-blame policy. She described a very productive 'second wave' of research within the school, in which pupils have become active partners in research – in some cases explicitly asking to become involved.

Kevin Smith highlighted evidence showing that opportunities for teachers to engage with and in research were constricted by day-to-day demands, as by well as the wider regime of accountability, despite a high proportion of those teachers demonstrating interest in finding relevant published research and implementing it in the classroom. He stated that sustained, iterative interventions need to be invested in to ensure that 'waves of disruption are carried out further, to include more schools, parents, businesses and other stakeholders that have an interest in what's happening in schools and communities'.

⁵ GwE is the area covered by the school effectiveness and improvement service for North Wales.

Rachel Bowen made the case for more research into further education specifically, as although half of young people in Wales go on to study in colleges after completing compulsory education, educational research focusses far more on the latter. Greater attention needs to be paid to whether and how findings from one sector can be (re)applied in the other, and to the 'bridge' between compulsory and post-compulsory education – particularly the struggles that may be experienced by learners during the transition between two different education systems.



Dr Kevin Smith & Eithne Hughes OBE



Dr Kevin Palmer & Dr Rachel Bowen

Developing on that point, **Kevin Palmer** reflected that during his teaching career he saw a similarity between pedagogic practices in colleges and in primary schools, as both could be characterised as 'enquiry-based pedagogy', in contrast to that in secondary schools. To him this demonstrated the potential for learning between learners and teachers across different phases and sectors of education. He also outlined his hopes for educational research and evidence-based practice in the form of three pairs of terms.

- *'Firstly, I want research to be **visible and valued** in a way that it isn't at the moment, and evidence-based practice to be visible and valued in the classroom.'*
- *'Secondly, I want it to be **comprehensive and coherent**: I want it to apply to all practitioners, to be an expectation that teachers will innovate, collaborate, and found their practice on research in a way that is nationally coherent.'*
- *'Thirdly, I want it to be **strategic and sensitive**. It's got to be nationally strategic, and it's got to speak across all three tiers. It's got to speak in the classroom and be sensitive to context.'*

Dr Palmer set out how he sees evidence-informed practice working on three different levels.

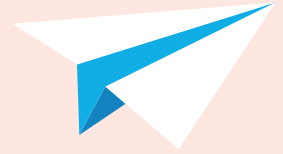
- The **first level** is teachers making use of (and generating) evidence to inform their practice, especially in pedagogy and in-the-moment decisions about how to respond to what our learners are doing in front of them.

- The **middle tier** – the higher education institution (HEI) community, regional consortia and local authorities – needs to act as an ‘engine of evidence generation and challenge that practitioners and headteachers can use’.
- At the **policy level** lies the responsibility to generate rigorously evidence-informed policy.

The subsequent question-and-answer session generated discussion about a number of issues, including the following.

- The difficulty that teachers face in challenging orthodoxies by undertaking their own research, particularly where they don’t feel supported or encouraged to do so by school leadership and other aspects of the education system. It was observed that ‘if it’s right for the children, it’s going to be right for the system’; that such learning is inevitably messy; and that a climate for learning within schools entails giving teachers license to take risks, be innovative, and to fail in some cases.
- The extent to which a culture of ‘being scared to fail’ may exist in education specifically because a failed innovation may have the potential to harm a learner’s education. Furthermore, it was suggested that this may result in a tendency to ‘bury’ aspects of a project that didn’t work well, thus depriving others of the opportunity to learn from those failures.
- Whether, given the increasingly mature understanding of the complexity of research in education, a coherent funding model for the multiple levels of engagement across the nation is currently in place.
- What mechanisms need to be put in place to systematically develop children as researchers, providing them with the opportunity to prioritise research enquiry within their own lives, set within a human rights framework?
- A cited crisis and/or decline in the educational research community in Wales’ HEIs, the importance of that community’s continued existence and rebuilding, and how it can be better supported.
- Whether the main problem facing practitioner research isn’t teachers’ willingness to engage in it but the barriers to doing so, including both lack of time and lack of rewards for conducting research.

2. ADDRESS BY KIRSTY WILLIAMS AM *CABINET SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION, WELSH GOVERNMENT*



The Cabinet Secretary described the day's conference as 'a milestone in itself' – 'the beginning of our journey to co-create a vision of education research in Wales'.

She described 'Our National Mission' for education in Wales as having three clear objectives: raising standards, reducing the attainment gap, and delivering an education system that inspires public confidence and national pride. Research-informed practice should be, and will be supported to become, routine, but renewed commitment to sharing research evidence and effective practice across the system through cross-sector collaboration is also needed.

'Our National Mission' commits the Government to policymaking based on sound evidence. The Welsh Government's team of social researchers provide her with high-quality evidence to inform policy decisions. She noted that the OECD's recent *Developing Schools as Learning Organisations in Wales* report⁶ praised the steps taken by the Welsh Government to strengthen the link between evidence, research and policy.

While there was recognition of greater strategic use of research to inform policy decisions, there is a need to continue to invest in building research capacity at all levels. The Cabinet Secretary appealed to the audience, describing the research community as the Government's 'critical friend'.

The new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership⁷ clearly set out the expectation that teachers will develop their practice on the basis of robust research. While many teachers were already doing so, it was recognised that many need further help to overcome barriers preventing them from accessing evidence and acquiring skills and expertise. She cited advice from the Wales Centre for Public Policy that 'teacher motivation and capacity are significant factors to consider', and that providing access to research is not enough.

The Cabinet Secretary recognised the strength of educational research from HEIs in Wales on show at the conference, and affirmed that she wants to see that research grow. The Welsh Government has begun to

6 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018). *Developing Schools as Learning Organisations in Wales*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/education/developing-schools-as-learning-organisations-in-wales-9789264307193-en.htm>

7 <http://learning.gov.wales/resources/collections/professional-standards>

make investments to this end through, for example, co-funding PhD studentships through the ESRC Wales Doctoral Training Partnership, whose first cohort are currently investigating a broad range of topics. She stated her keenness to experiment with other means of increasing research capacity within HEIs and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) centres, highlighting a collaborative project between the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) and ITE centres that has supported researchers to participate more regularly and effectively in policy-relevant research. She expressed her hope for more such collegiate partnerships in future.

The Cabinet Secretary mentioned the co-funding to support WISERD's Education Data Lab, which will generate independent, high-quality evidence for organisations across the system, inform national debate, and challenge our understanding of educational processes and outcomes. She also committed to making further investments in research capacity-building over the rest of the government's term.

She also affirmed the importance of the Welsh Government's work with partners in the middle-tier – Estyn,⁸ Qualifications Wales,⁹ and the Education Workforce Council¹⁰ – to ensure a coherent approach to evidence-informed school improvement.

The Cabinet Secretary concluded by describing her aspirations for educational research in Wales:

- to develop career-long professional learning embedded in evidence-based research and effective collaboration
- to invest in Wales-specific education research, and ensure that it is converted into action for school improvement
- to co-create a national education research strategy that provides a coherent and transparent framework for education research in Wales.

She made no apology for the fact that these are big aspirations that expect a lot from the sector, and conceded that she could not promise that reform will be straightforward.

8 Estyn is the office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales.

9 Qualification Wales is the independent statutory body, funded by the Welsh Government, that regulates qualifications (other than degrees) in Wales.

10 The Education Workforce Council is the independent regulator in Wales for teachers in maintained schools and further education (FE), learning support staff in both school and FE settings, youth workers and people involved in work-based learning.

3. CLOSE-TO-PRACTICE RESEARCH WHAT IS IT, AND HOW CAN ITS QUALITY BE IMPROVED?



DOMINIC WYSE, UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
CHRIS BROWN, UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH

Professors Wyse and Brown presented a summary of their work with Sandy Oliver and Ximena Poblete on the Close to Practice Research project, which recently published its final report.¹¹ Commissioned by BERA, the project examined dimensions of quality in close-to-practice (CtP) educational research, with the objective of considering how the Association can best advance the quality of CtP research in the academic discipline of education.

Their findings described the attributes of high-quality research that follow the methodological traditions most widely used in CtP research.

Stronger studies:

- make an original contribution to the field – and, importantly, make that contribution explicitly clear
- make robust use of their methodology – ensuring, for example, that fundamental aspects of their chosen research designs were in place
- evidence sufficient theorisation throughout.

In weaker CtP research, methodology tended not to be explained in sufficient depth, and a rigorous account of data analysis was frequently neglected, particularly in qualitative research.



Professor Dominic Wyse



Professor Chris Brown

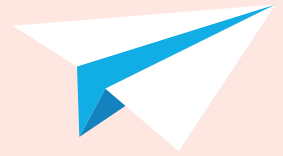
¹¹ See Wyse, D., Brown, C., Oliver, S. & Poblete, X. (2018). *The BERA Close-to-Practice Research Project: Research Report*. London: British Educational Research Association. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/bera-statement-on-close-to-practice-research>

Among their recommendations were for BERA to:

- engage with networks of researchers and practitioners as partners in driving, conducting, reporting and using research
- articulate strategies and career development opportunities for close-to-practice researchers in universities that are likely to support the development of their methodological knowledge
- support universities to maintain and strengthen the PhD-by-publication route to a doctorate as one that can result in more efficient use of academic time
- engage with practitioners from schools, and researchers, to explore the methodological aspects of CtP research.



4. PRINCIPAL FINDINGS FROM CROSS-SECTOR DISCUSSION GROUPS



During this session, conference delegates were assigned to groups that were purposively mixed in terms of members' sectors and occupations, and asked to discuss four questions that were displayed on screens to stimulate discussion. Delegates were also invited to submit short written responses to each question using the Meetoo app.¹² These responses were displayed on screens as they were submitted, in real time, and summed up by Professor Sally Power before the floor was opened up to questions and reflections from delegates.

Responses to each question were collected and subsequently analysed – summaries of responses, including data graphics and selections of key quotes, are presented below. These responses were submitted by delegates who took part in this session of the conference and chose to contribute using the Meetoo app. Some respondents may have reported the content of group discussions rather than their own individual views, and some may have provided multiple responses to a single question. As such, they are not necessarily representative of the views or activities either of all conference attendees, or those of the educational research community in Wales as a whole.



¹² Meetoo (now rebranded as Vevox) is 'a real-time polling and moderated discussion platform' that enables participants to use a smartphone or other device to submit responses to questions or other prompts. These responses can be displayed 'live' during an event or meeting, as well as recorded for subsequent analysis. See <https://www.meetoo.com/about>.

Question 1: What education research is currently happening in Wales?

A wide range of research projects and activity were identified, with small-scale projects featuring strongly among the 158 responses to this question.

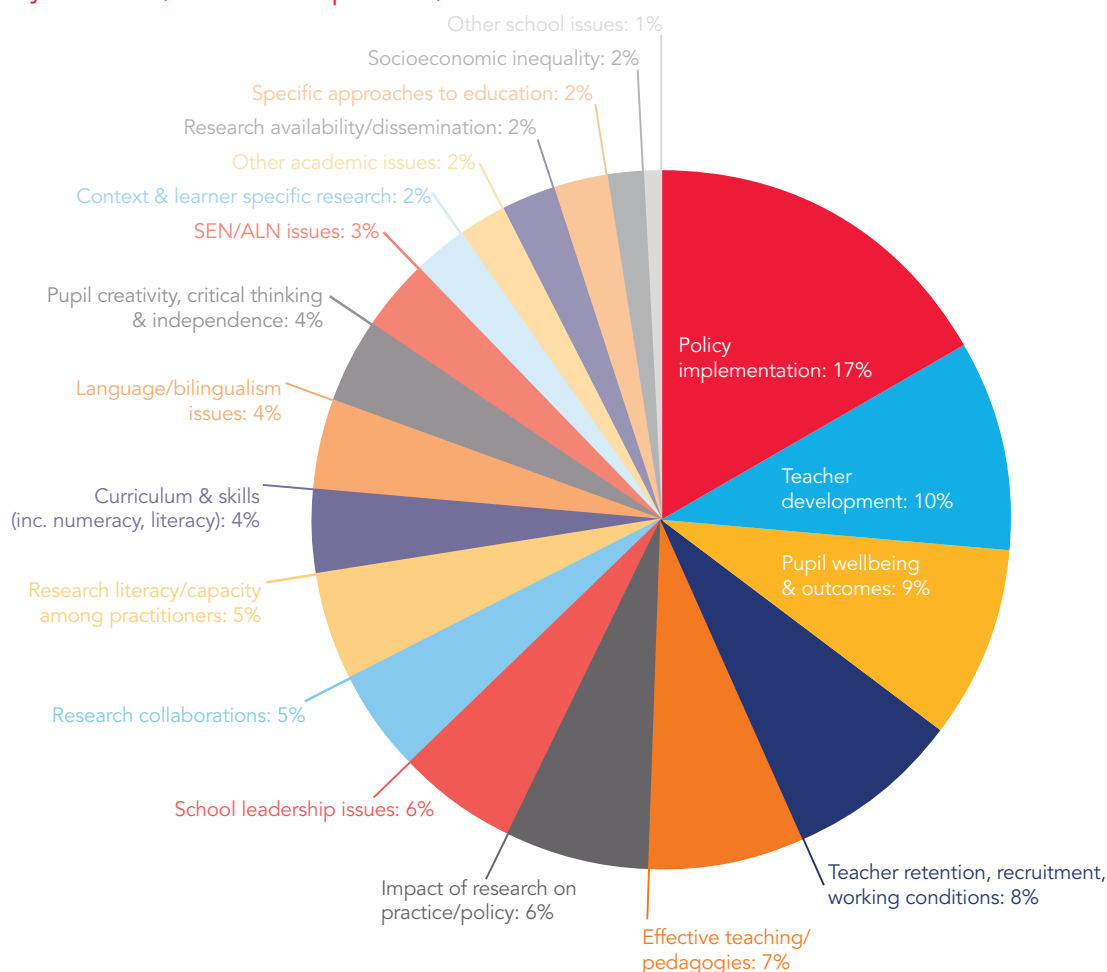
A large proportion of research activity appeared to be school-focussed and relevant to teachers. Much of it was related to the new curriculum, and the particular challenges that Wales faces – the introduction of all-age schools, bilingualism and the Welsh language. There were small pockets of international research, but most activity was local, small-scale and in partnership with schools.

A full list of responses to this question is available as a separate appendix to this report, at www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/the-future-of-educational-research-in-wales.

Question 2: What are the areas of research we need?

Figure 4.1

Responses to question 2, 'What are the areas of research we need?', by theme (% of all responses)



A number of delegates made the point that that consideration should be given to not just producing more research, but to what to do with the research that currently exists.¹³ Similarly, some recommended a focus on research collaboration both among practitioners and schools, and between sectors – particularly between schools and HEIs.

'I don't feel further areas are needed, the[re] needs to be a refinement and focus on increasing the depth of what is already going on. Many schools are engaging in research but not sharing and collaborating, there needs to be a repository for educational research across Wales, no matter the level, in order to build research networks.'

"More" isn't always what's needed. Access to high quality international research will often have more benefit for practitioners.'

'Development of effective collaboration networks for teachers in rural areas.'

Across the areas of research identified, four broad categories emerged:

- Some delegates were concerned about policies and initiatives taking place in Wales, and wanted to see research about the new curriculum; the new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership; new pay and conditions; the Pupil Development Grant; and other specific Welsh initiatives and policies. 'Policy implementation' was the most frequently mentioned theme, accounting for 17 per cent of the total.

'Research to identify the most effective assessment framework to support Donaldson.'

'How might the new curriculum shape changes to the culture in schools?'

'Why do we have leadership capacity issues in Wales? How we can respond to this?'

- Research into current social concerns was also mentioned, particularly work focussed on pupils' wellbeing and outcomes (9 per cent) that explores concerns about emotional health, for example, and the use of social media.

¹³ In total, 124 distinct responses to this question were submitted. For questions 2, 3 and 4, single submissions that covered multiple themes were separated out into distinct responses covering one theme only.

'Social emotional and behavioural issues and their impact on pupil learning.'

'Lower baselines of pupils entering schools... missing essential skills even in traditionally advantaged areas. Poor fine motor skills, social skills, oracy, behaviour. Often this is blamed on iPad nanny... but is this accurate?'

- Others were concerned with 'workforce issues', including, for instance, enquiries into teacher development (10 per cent) and teacher retention, recruitment and working conditions (8 per cent) and into what makes effective teaching (7 per cent). Professor Power highlighted the already large body of published research on that area, and suggested that the main challenge may be to make that research accessible, widely understood and properly interrogated.

'Teacher perception of their changing role, and the impact this may be having on retention.'

'Pedagogical practices best suited to different groups of learners.'

- Finally, some delegates suggested the need for more research into how research can and should impact upon practice and policy (6 per cent), and into research literacy and capacity among practitioners (5 per cent).

'Quality control, collecting, publishing and dissemination of research already being carried out in schools.'

Question 3: What are the key challenges we face in undertaking this research?

The two most frequently cited barriers to conducting the research discussed in response to question 2 were time (including issues of capacity and conflicting priorities), which accounted for 18 per cent of responses) and money/funding (13 per cent).¹⁴

Beyond time and money, many delegates focussed on teachers and their working conditions. Concerns about culture and attitudes within schools and the teaching community accounted for more than 12 per cent of responses (the term 'teacher apathy' was picked up on in subsequent discussions). A further 2 per cent of respondents mentioned issues with the attitudes of or support from employers and school leaders.

'Changing the mindset of [those] who do not see the value of research... or who believe research is only about "writing up".'

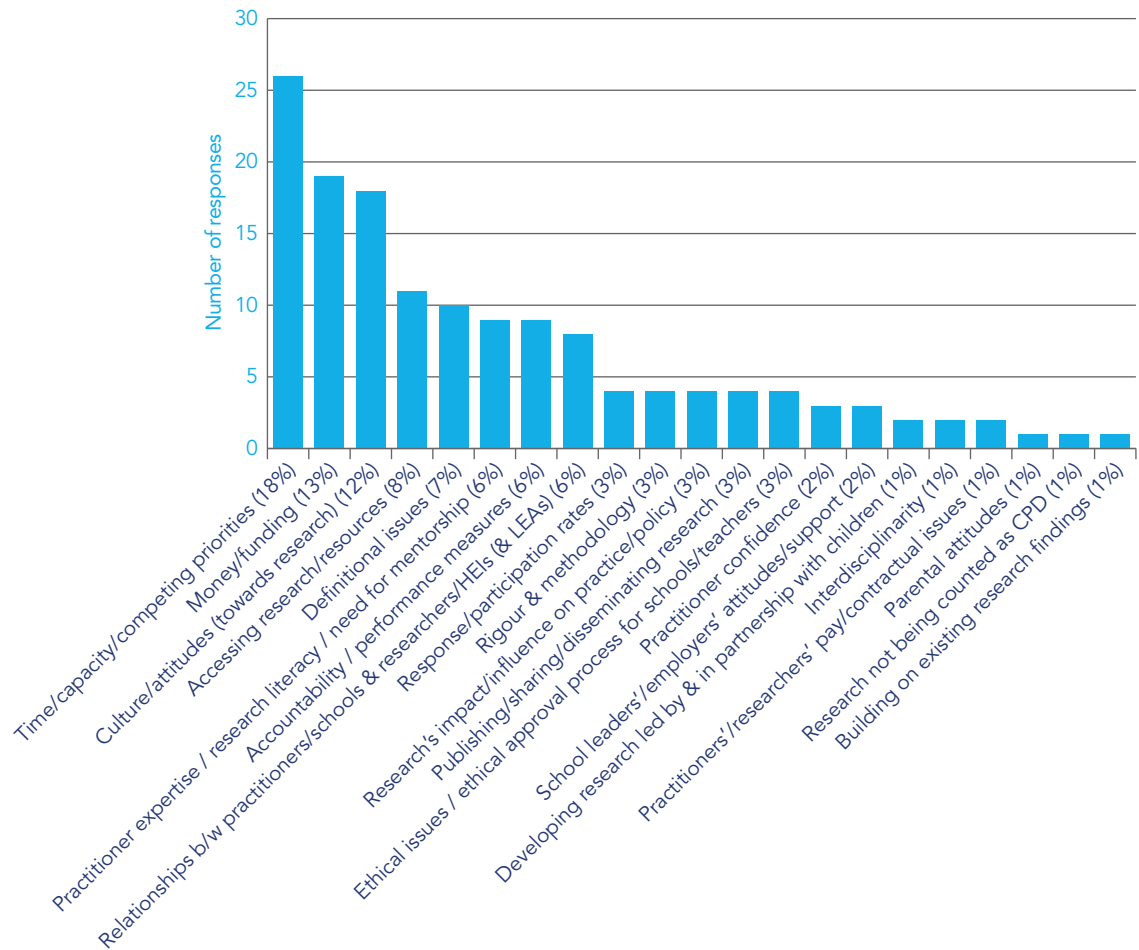
¹⁴ In total, 145 distinct responses to this question were submitted.

'Having the right school culture.'

'Fear – sometimes based around pressures from leadership.'

Figure 4.2

Responses to question 3, 'What are the key challenges we face in undertaking this research?', by theme



This belief among delegates that changes in culture and priorities within schools are necessary if research is to become a higher priority among a greater number of practitioners was also evident in other responses. For example, a number of delegates expressed concerns about accountability and performance measures (6 per cent), arguing that targets and Estyn inspections were pushing research down the agenda.

'Estyn, or the fear of it...'

'Accountability- data, targets and performance pressures.'

A number of delegates highlighted the need to develop practitioners' research expertise and literacy (6 per cent), and their confidence (2 per cent), with some suggesting that mentors would be helpful in both regards.

'Ensuring an understanding of the spectrum of research, and what questions it can and can't answer (each methodology has a strength and a place in the big picture).'

'External support for practitioners who want to engage.'

Similarly, it was felt that many practitioners lack access to, or knowledge about how to access, high-quality academic research (8 per cent), and numerous delegates were keen to improve working relationships between schools/practitioners and HEIs/researchers (8 per cent).

'Teacher access to academic journals.'

'An awareness of how to access high quality research.'

'Lack of opportunities for teachers and researchers to come together like this.'

'Addressing the gap between schools and HEIs and local education authorities. Communication between these groups. Lots of working in silos that needs addressing.'

Many delegates raised concerns around the practicalities of conducting research, from both practitioner and academic perspectives, such as response and participation rates among schools and practitioners (3 per cent), and issues of rigour and methodology in close-to-practice research (3 per cent). Four delegates (3 per cent) raised the issue of ethics – specifically a need to improve access to ethical approval processes for practitioner-researchers, as well as ethical considerations specific to conducting research involving children; a further two delegates (1 per cent) expressed a concern to develop research that is led by, or in partnership with, children.

Question 4: Besides the obvious issue of funding, what resources or structures are required to overcome those challenges?

Delegates made many very specific and practical suggestions, which are illustrated in figure 4.3 and listed in the appendix on page 28. However, it was possible to group some responses into distinct themes such as 'collaboration and networking' and 'more time for practitioner engagement with/in research'.

Fourteen per cent were concerned with improving collaboration and networking between sectors.¹⁵

¹⁵ In total, 109 distinct responses to this question were submitted.

'More open collaboration between HEI, FE, schools and other organisations – perhaps using online platforms to facilitate.'

'Links with more knowledgeable others for useful and informative learning conversations.'

Twelve per cent wanted more research-related training, professional development and support to be made available to teachers.

'Systems that support staff and trainees in engaging in research; some sort of support for trainees once they leave, in order to keep them engaged with the research agenda.'

'Free modelling/coaching from experienced (senior) researchers.'

Ten per cent said that more time needed to be made available for practitioner engagement with and in research.

'Time for schools staff to engage with academic researchers and reflect on their own practice.'

'Workload time to value attendance at conferences/networks like this.'

On the latter point, delegates were concerned to ensure that new investment announced as part of the National Approach to Professional Learning-launched on 12 November by the Cabinet Secretary for Education, was used to release teachers to conduct research, as was intended.¹⁶

A number of delegates wanted wider and easier access to research journals and research papers (7 per cent).

'Teacher access to research papers. Nearly all teachers I know wouldn't know where to start to access them in Wales.'

Some suggested a shared resource of some kind: a database, data portal, shared hub or resource that covered relevant research, specifically research relevant to Wales (6 per cent).

'A database, well organised, with brief headlines linking to one-page articles and then links to full research.'

¹⁶ See <https://gov.wales/newsroom/educationandskills/2018/kirsty-williams-announces-single-biggest-investment-in-support-for-teachers/>

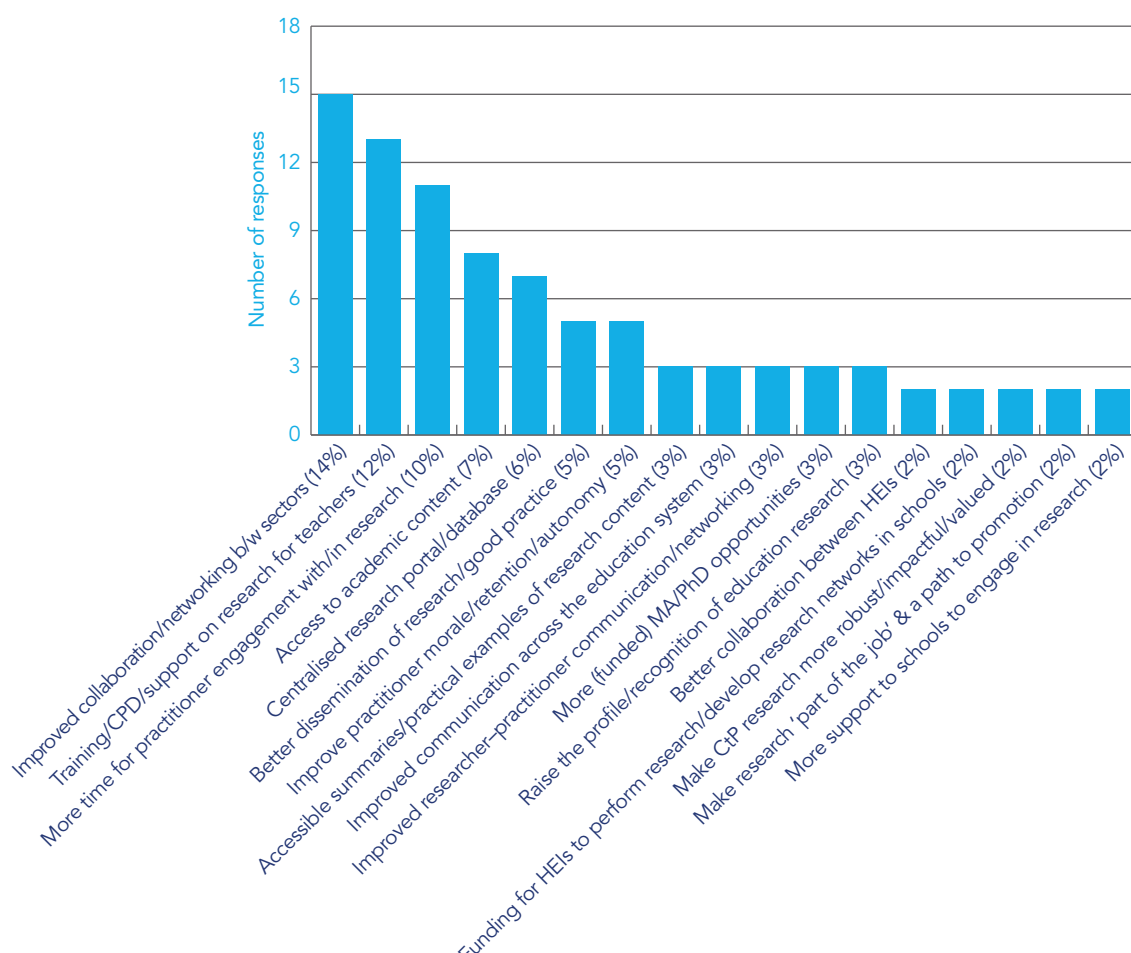
However, other responses (3 per cent) made the point that most research content isn't written with teachers in mind, and focussed on the need for accessible summaries of research content that include practical examples.

'Translating research and disseminating it in a meaningful way; include accessible and explicit suggestions for practice/implementation that capture the nuances of the findings, rather than inadvertently perpetuating misconceptions.'

Other suggestions included strategic funding to support links between schools and HEIs (1 per cent), programmes that would bring pupil- and teacher-researchers together (1 per cent), and making better use of and expanding the resources on offer through the Hwb.¹⁷

Figure 4.3

Responses to question 4, 'Besides the obvious issue of funding, what resources or structures are required to overcome those challenges?', by theme (two or more responses only)¹⁸



17 Hwb is a website and collection of online tools provided to schools in Wales by the Welsh Government. See hwb.gov.wales/.

18 See the appendix for a list of single responses that were not repeated.

5. PLENARY DEBATE

THE STRATEGIC DIRECTION OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN WALES



During this session, delegates were invited to contribute their thoughts and reflections on the day's proceedings, and in particular to raise any vital issues that had not yet been discussed.

5.1 Definitional issues

An argument was made in favour of broadening what counts as good scholarship in education and educational research, particularly at a practitioner level. The debate about what constitutes research was felt to have been very empirical, to the exclusion of other valid approaches – such as literature reviews, or action, comparative, historical or philosophical research – that may be both more practical for time-poor classroom practitioners, and more adept at asking the question, 'What *should* good practice look like?'. It was also suggested that a current emphasis on practice was, while valuable, diverting attention away from the critical self-reflective practice that teachers need to engage in to improve their practice.



Furthermore, there was discussion of whether definitional issues may also serve to discourage practitioners from engaging in research and critical reflection. For example, the word 'research' itself can be considered a loaded term in that it can give practitioners the impression that they are being asked to pursue a second career as a researcher, rather than to use research as a means to become better at what they're very good at doing already. Relatedly, a note of caution was sounded regarding loaded terms – 'teacher apathy', for example (see section 4, question 3) – that are sometimes used in relation to practitioners who may be less research-engaged. It was suggested that greater circumspection about the judgements implied by such terms, and greater consideration of the contextual factors that might cause some practitioners to be, or appear to be, apathetic or unwilling to participate, was required.

There were also warnings that a lack of clarity and consensus on the definition of key terms and concepts, both within Wales and more widely, may lead to a lack of cohesion in the research being produced. For instance, it was pointed out that the word 'pedagogy' is often used as a synonym for 'a practical decision that a practitioner makes in the classroom', or to describe a certain approach to teaching – whereas pedagogy should, it was said, be taken to mean philosophically and scientifically reflecting on what makes learning work.

5.2 Subject-specialist research

A number of delegates felt that subject-specialist research, despite being of critical importance, had been underdiscussed. 'Social science research' was felt to have dominated at the expense of 'subject depth' and subject-specialist research concerned with subject-specific pedagogies. It was emphasised that pedagogy can't be picked up



in a decontextualised situation: it means nothing without context, and deep knowledge about a particular subject is necessary for a practitioner to understand and know what it is they want to teach and to choose the correct tools for transmission.

Furthermore, subject-specialist research was felt to be particularly important for subject areas that have undergone, or are going through, significant changes, and to make sense of new and emerging Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs).¹⁹ An example was made of how physical education is transitioning towards the 'Health and Wellbeing' AoLE, which is likely to be more expansive and will require further research to fully explore and map it.

5.3 Working with children

Children should, it was said, be treated as valid partners in practitioners' research, rather than merely participants in it. Both can assist each other's learning, and in doing so both can develop research skills for life.

¹⁹ The new Curriculum for Wales will comprise six Areas of Learning and Experience: Expressive Arts; Health and Well-being; Humanities; Languages, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; and Science and Technology. See <https://curriculumforwales.gov.wales/2018/06/20/how-areas-of-learning-and-experience-are-being-developed-as-a-central-element-of-the-new-curriculum/>

In addition, it was suggested that action was needed to address the widespread difficulty encountered in gaining ethical approval for research involving children in schools. The fact that schools tend not to have ethics policies meant that many researchers would benefit from the support of some sort of ethics framework or set of procedures. Difficulties in this area were felt to be an impediment to collaborations between HEIs and schools.

5.4 Research's relationship to practice

There was agreement with the point raised by Philippa Cordingley (see section 1.2), that providing practitioners with access to research evidence in the form of academic journals or even digested evidence bulletins isn't enough, in and of itself, to ensure that they are able to put that evidence into practice. Links between the research community and practitioners need to be forged and supported – and the important question is, 'Who should play that role?'

The need for research outputs and other resources to be produced in ways that are mindful of the needs of the diverse array of stakeholders within the education system was discussed. The research and reporting activity performed by, for example, Estyn, and in HEIs, could be more widely used to help improve practice in classrooms if a little additional work were done to tailor their outputs to make them more readily comprehensible for and useable by multiple audiences in different parts of the education system.



6. CLOSING ADDRESS

PROFESSOR JOHN GARDNER



Professor Gardner cited the presence of past and present BERA presidents at the conference as a demonstration of the deep interest among the educational research community across the UK in the issues addressed throughout the day.

Professor Gardner noted his roles as Chair of the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Advisory Board, and of the Welsh Government's Evidence Informed Practice and Education Research Task and Finish Group. He described how the Task and Finish Group had been tasked with asking a variety of stakeholders, such as HEIs, regional consortia and regulators, to supply evidence, thoughts and ideas about how to take the next step forward in educational research in Wales. There has, he reflected, already been significant success on that front already: the enthusiasm and commitment demonstrated by so many people at this conference would not have been in evidence five years ago.

Professor Gardner discussed the range of advice and recommendations related to supporting educational research in Wales that has been published in recent years, including the Furlong report,²⁰ a report by the OECD,²¹ the evaluation of WISERDEducation²² and the recent report published by the British Academy and Royal Society, *Harnessing educational research*.²³

Central to all the advice that has been provided were, Professor Gardner said, a number of key points.

- It is vital that research capacity in Wales is increased.
- Similarly, the *quality* of research in Wales needs to be raised.
- There must be greater collaboration between all parties in Wales: between and within schools and colleges; between and within the

20 Furlong, J. (2015, March 9). *Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers: Options for the future of initial teacher education in Wales*. Oxford: University of Oxford. Retrieved from <https://beta.gov.wales/review-initial-teacher-training-2015-teaching-tomorrows-teachers>

21 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018). *Developing Schools as Learning Organisations in Wales*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/education/developing-schools-as-learning-organisations-in-wales-9789264307193-en.htm>

22 Oancea, A., Fancourt, N., Robson, J., Thompson, I. & Childs, A., with Michie, J. (2017, November). Evaluation of WISERDEducation: Report to HEFCW. Retrieved from https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/publications/external-reports_and_studies/external_reports_studies.aspx

23 Royal Society & British Academy (2018, October). *Harnessing educational research*. London. Retrieved from <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/royal-society-british-academy-educational-research/>

middle-tier group of organisations, and the regulators; between and within HEIs; and, crucially, between and within each of those sectors.

- Research resources should be more focussed on addressing issues and challenges within Wales.
- The issue of the learner-as-researcher should not be overlooked. In a system that wants to improve the experience of everybody engaged in education there are, Professor Gardner said, opportunities for learners to assist and participate in research, or to actually perform the research, and to thereby provide insights into the topics under investigation that could not otherwise be gained.
- It is essential to optimise all the resources available for research in education.

'One of the very best resources that we have is sitting in this room, or is on the waiting list trying to get places to get into this room. What we've seen here today – that's enthusiasm. That's motivation. That's traction. That's momentum. That's resource.'

Professor Gardner urged practitioners to bring the understanding that they gain from engaging with research and existing knowledge into their organisations, and to use it to help solve problems and address the challenges facing those organisations. That, he said, is truly engaging with research. It is not necessary to become a 'second-career social scientist': one need only follow one's personal curiosity and engage with what is out there.

Professor Gardner drew proceedings to a close by calling on delegates to take personal and collective responsibility: 'You have to collaborate, to identify where educational research currently is, where it should be and how to get there'.





This conference organised by BERA and the Welsh Government provided a showcase of educational research underway in Wales. Through the posters, the presentations and the contributions from everyone present on the day, we saw a vibrant snapshot of the Welsh educational research community and gained insights into the ways in which it is deeply embedded in policy and practice. This publication celebrates the work already underway, and is an attempt to further the objectives of the conference.

A strong research community with close links to policy and practice is an essential part of a successful education system. Our conference in Cardiff set out high expectations, in terms of quality and quantity, for educational research in Wales, and promoted a vision of research-informed teaching driving school improvement that chimed with BERA's recent work on close-to-practice research.²⁴

BERA has three key strategic aims: to advance quality, to build capacity, and to foster engagement in educational research. This event gave us a unique opportunity, in partnership with the Welsh Government, to pursue all three of these goals. We hope that by bringing together so many stakeholders the event has strengthened existing relationships and enabled some new ones to be forged. This in turn will support a research-driven education system with a teaching profession that is well-informed, learning from excellence at local, national and international levels, and engaging actively with educational research and higher education institutions. However, we also know the challenges of enhancing the capacity of educational research in Wales, and of supporting researchers in their work.

It is important that the conference is not seen as an end in itself. It captured a moment in time and, we hope, provided valuable impetus to the ongoing work in Wales. It was supported by a series of posts on the BERA Blog that also addressed the educational landscape.²⁵ BERA remains committed to supporting this work, through our members in Wales and our wider engagement with policymakers

24 See Wyse, D., Brown, C., Oliver, S. & Poblete, X. (2018). *The BERA Close-to-Practice Research Project: Research Report*. London: British Educational Research Association. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/bera-statement-on-close-to-practice-research>

25 To mark the conference, Dr Kevin Smith of Cardiff University edited a 'special issue' of the BERA Blog on education in Wales. His editorial includes links to each of the other four blogs in the series: Smith, K. (2018, November 14). Through adversity comes strength: Educational policy reform and developing research capacity in Wales. BERA Blog. Retrieved from <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/through-adversity-comes-strength-educational-policy-reform-and-developing-research-capacity-in-wales>

and practitioners. This is already continuing with further events and activities in Wales involving Welsh researchers, and we look forward to further engagement with Welsh Government in the years to come.

Nick Johnson

Executive Director, British Educational Research Association (BERA)



APPENDIX 1

FURTHER ANSWERS TO QUESTION 4:

'BESIDES THE OBVIOUS ISSUE OF FUNDING, WHAT RESOURCES OR STRUCTURES ARE REQUIRED TO OVERCOME THOSE CHALLENGES?'

Of the 109 responses to this question received from delegates to the conference, 19, when their meanings were analysed and formulated, were found to be unique and not to have been repeated; these are listed below. For responses that were repeated at least once, see figure 4.3.

- Clear responsibilities for all stakeholders in 'national mission'.
- Commitment to research and collaboration among school leadership.
- Fewer poorly-evidenced changes in strategy within schools.
- Focus on collaboration in rural areas.
- Funded leadership accreditation encouraging school leaders to engage in school improvement research.
- Greater attentiveness to context.
- Greater confidence.
- Greater understanding of education research in Wales among HEI leadership.
- Guest researchers based in schools.
- High-quality leadership.
- Including training on children's human rights in ITE.
- Less Cardiff-centric funding within Wales.
- Make better use of existing networks interested in research.
- Make research 'part of the job' and a path to promotion (including the creation of hybrid 'teacher-researcher' role within schools).
- A new body to co-ordinate education research and improve links.
- Opportunities for school issues to inform HEIs' research agendas.
- A programme offering research activities/'tasters' for teachers and pupils.
- Wholesale rethinking of educational system, its structures and funding.
- Wider use of existing access to academic content.

