

Wales since devolution: Educational research and scholarly identities

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ABSTRACT

The scholarly identity of educational researchers in Wales, and of researchers who study in Wales while living outside it, are set against the changes in structure and finance that have occurred since 1992 when responsibility for higher education in Wales was devolved from London to Cardiff, and the funding of higher education was altered to remove the distinction between “universities” and “polytechnics”. The impact of the better-known political devolution of 1979 is a major focus.

Introduction

This paper focuses on educational research, and the scholarly identities of educational researchers, in post-devolution Wales. It draws on, and should be read in conjunction with, a paper published by two of the authors (Rees & Power, 2007), which presents a longer, and more densely argued account of the ways in which the restructuring of the UK state (Bogdanor, 2001) has changed the political economy of educational research in Wales. Here we address three issues:

1. The ways in which responsibility, funding of, and evaluation of educational research have, and equally importantly, have *not*, been devolved to Wales from London since 1992.
2. The impact of the various contemporary audit systems on educational research in Wales since their inception.
3. Some reflections on the scholarly identities of educational researchers in Wales, ‘Welsh’ educational researchers, and those who study aspects of Welsh education.

Devolution

The UK consists of four nations, although most English people, including educational researchers and commentators, frequently equate ‘England’ with the UK. (See Delamont, 1999 for a detailed discussion of this topic). The four nations (Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England) have had different degrees of control over their own education system from pre-school to postgraduate research and training since 1945. To understand Welsh educational research, and its institutional context in higher education, which changed radically in 1992, it is helpful to recognise the different regimes governing schooling that existed in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales from 1945 until 1997–99. The election of a Labour Government in 1997, with a public commitment to referenda on devolution to Scotland and Wales, changed the focus of control over schooling in Wales, allowing

the new Welsh Assembly Government (hereafter WAG) to have a position in relation to schools much closer to that which existed in Northern Ireland and Scotland (Rees, 2004).

Scotland has had control over its school system throughout the post World War Two era, with, for example, a different age of transfer to secondary school (12 not 11), a more enthusiastic adoption of comprehensive secondary schooling, and different examinations at 16, 17 and 18 (see Richardson, 2002; Gray, McPherson & Raffe, 1983; McPherson & Willms, 1987; Turner, Riddell & Brown, 1995). Scottish higher education, with a distinctive four year undergraduate degree, had considerable autonomy from London, before the creation in 1992 of a separate funding body in Edinburgh. Northern Ireland, whether the government was functioning from Belfast, or had been suspended in favour of direct rule from London, has retained single-sex schooling, the 11+ exam and grammar schools, (unlike England, Wales or Scotland). Most striking to outsiders, however, is the deeply entrenched religious segregation, so that almost all State schools are denominational (either Roman Catholic or Protestant). The consequences of these three segregations by sex, ability and religion are chronicled by Connolly (1998; 2004).

Wales had very little control over its schools after 1945, and it is only since 1999 that a distinctive Welsh policy on pre-school, primary and secondary education has been apparent (Rees & Power, 2007). As the educational systems, from pre-school to higher education, of England and Wales become increasingly divergent there is a greater need for educational research on Welsh education, at exactly the time that the research base has been eroded by changes in higher education and the impact of the various audit regimes.

Whereas the devolution of control over Welsh schooling only occurred after 1999, the position regarding higher education is different. The Conservative government of 1992, although hostile to devolution, actually separated control over higher education in the four countries in that year. They abolished the binary line between Polytechnics which were partly under the influence of local government bodies and Universities which were very loosely run by the University Grants Committee (UGC) a UK-wide body. This increased the number of universities from around 40 to over 90 and removed all local government input. New funding mechanisms were put in place with four separate bodies: Higher Education funding Councils for Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England. The English Funding Council is responsible for more institutions than the other three combined, and has organised the Research Assessment Exercise (hereafter RAE) for the whole UK since 1992: inheriting the task from the UGC which had run the exercises restricted to the Universities only in 1985 and 1989.

The audit systems

Several audit systems with impact on educational research in Wales in the past thirty years have been imposed on the higher education (HE) sector. Some have come and gone again, either because they have been abolished, or because devolution has driven them out of Wales. One audit system that did not set out to have any impact on educational research, but actually weakened it severely, was run by The Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE). This body had the remit of inspecting, and either accrediting or "failing", all initial teacher training institutions in England and Wales from 1984 to 1992. It insisted that anyone involved in the initial training of student teachers had to have "hands on", "recent and relevant" classroom teaching experience in a school or FE college, which, together with teaching terms for education departments being six to eight weeks longer than those for other university subjects, effectively destroyed the research in many education departments, or made it a minority activity, creating a dual labour market (teacher trainers versus "scholars"). Many staff in education departments simply found it impossible to return regularly to classrooms to refresh their recent and relevant credential *and* to conduct and publish educational research. We have not provided an historical account of all such audit regimes, but rather focus on those currently exercising the most power over educational researchers.

There are currently three National (i.e. UK-wide) bodies that have exercised a profound influence on educational research in Wales. These are our main focus: the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA); the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC); and the section of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) which runs the RAE for the higher education funding bodies in all four nations.

The QAA audits institutions at the institutional level to ensure that they are financially viable and have robust quality assurance and improvement mechanisms. From 1992–2002 they ran a series of audits on the teaching of various disciplines, including education. Public grades were issued, and incorporated into league tables published in national newspapers. Although no inspections have been done since 2002, the gradings issued prior to that date are still attached to education departments across Wales. Currently the QAA publish two sets of UK-wide standards for teaching that affect educational research. First the QAA organises the creation and maintenance of subject benchmarks. These are descriptions of what a graduate in a particular subject, including undergraduate degrees in education, must be able to do. In 2004 the QAA established a set of guidelines for postgraduate research students, including 36 transferable skills “required” by employers, and these, too, are UK wide. An educational researcher in Wales works, therefore, with the QAA in the background, and when a QAA audit publishes a negative report on an institution it can have serious consequences. The QAA can state that the degrees awarded by a higher education institution (HEI) are not of an acceptable standard, which is a matter of public shame, and, if not speedily remedied, *could* result in the HEI being amalgamated or even closed.

The ESRC is important because since 1986 (see Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2000) its Training and Development Board has run a postgraduate training recognition exercise every five years. Only departments that offer a training programme that meets the ESRC’s guidelines, and have ensured that a high percentage (currently 70%) of its doctoral students submit within four years, are allowed to have ESRC funding for PhD students. This has concentrated full time funded PhD students into fewer and fewer institutions since 1986. Currently in Wales only one institution in the south and one in the north have recognition. Given that full time PhD students have produced a substantial proportion of the educational research done in Wales (e.g. Brown, 1987; Beynon, 1985; Gorard, 2000; Pugsley, 2004; Smith, 2005), and that having full time PhD students is one way in which academics can ensure their own research agenda is validated and reinvigorated, this ESRC audit has consequences beyond its immediate effect. Many overseas governments treat ESRC recognition as a quality indicator, so well-funded students from countries such as Malaysia are also increasingly concentrated in the same institutions that have ESRC recognition. The ESRC operates on a UK wide basis, and applies the same criteria in all four nations, although it should be noted that Welsh and Gaelic are recognised by ESRC as languages with a shortage of fluent social science researcher-speakers.

The audit system, which has had the biggest impact on HE in Wales is, however, the RAE. The first two exercises in 1985 and 1989 only applied to universities: the subsequent exercises, in 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008 have been voluntary (a HEI need not enter) but are open to all HEIs. Since 1992 the financial implications in all disciplines have become increasingly far reaching. The exercise takes place on a UK wide basis, ignoring the differential funding regimes in HE in the four nations. In Wales since 1992 the consequences of the RAE have been that only Cardiff gets a funding stream from the funding council to maintain the research infrastructure. The RAE is the central focus of the paper, and so we have set it in an historical context and devoted space to its origins and consequences.

The RAE and educational research in Wales

Historically, educational research in higher education institutions was concentrated in the established constituent institutions of the national University of Wales at Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff and Swansea (Thomas, 1992). Following the establishment of the University Grants

Committee in 1919 and in line with the other universities across the UK, these institutions received a single block grant of state funding to cover both teaching and research activities. This research funding was intended to provide university staff with time and core resources such as laboratories with equipment and technicians, to enable them to carry out research, in addition to their teaching duties. Additional funding was necessary from alternative sources to cover the costs associated with the conduct of particular research projects (although these alternative sources were very limited until the latter part of the twentieth century). Hence, this funding regime for university-based research became known as the “dual support system” (Halsey, 1992).

In 1986, a new system was introduced to determine the allocation of the research element of the block grant to UK universities, based on peer review of the research performance of university departments. This evaluation was repeated in 1989 and 1992. Following a redefinition of the higher education sector in the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, this 1992 RAE covered not only the established universities, but also the polytechnics and higher education colleges, the overwhelming majority of which were in the process of being granted university status. These latter institutions had not previously received funding for research through the block grant. Further RAEs were held in 1996, 2001, and 2008. These successive RAEs have provided the central element in the determination of what has come to be known as “quality related” (QR) funding within the block grant, which is still intended to support core research activities within the dual support system.

The dual support system and, within it, the allocation of QR funding, constitute a UK-wide regime for the support of research in universities. Higher education institutions in Wales participate in this regime on the same basis as those in other parts of the UK. This remains the case, despite the fact that powers over higher education have been devolved to the National Assembly and the WAG. However, the *effects* of this funding regime have been distinctive to Wales. Tables Ia, Ib and Ic begin to demonstrate some of these effects. The Tables show, for the 1992, 1996 and 2001 RAEs, the ranking (“grade”, with 5* the highest) achieved by each Welsh higher education institution, which submitted a return for education. They also show the proportions (with A indicating the highest band) and actual numbers of staff who were deemed to be “research active” and whose research performance was thus judged worthy of evaluation.¹

A number of points are worth noting here. Educational research performance (as measured by the RAE) in these Welsh institutions is not very strong. It is true that by the 2001 RAE Cardiff had moved to the highest rating (5*). However, overall, the ratings are concentrated at the lower levels of the scale; and this has been the case throughout the period since 1992, when the current version of the RAE system was introduced. Indeed, it is likely that these RAE scores reflect some of the long-term characteristics of the organisation of educational research in Welsh higher education (Webster, 1982). For example, the scale of educational research activity represented here is very small, making it very difficult to sustain vigorous research activity with relatively small numbers of staff in each institution and almost impossible to do so across the whole range of specialisms in educational research (irrespective of what the research “needs” of the education system itself may be). Hence, during the earlier part of the period considered here, there were around 100 staff deemed “research active”, of whom some 50% were concentrated in two universities by 1996. Moreover, by 2001, the figure had fallen to fewer than 80 “research active” staff with 60% of these confined to the same two universities.² This represents a decline of some 25% in a five year period.

Table 1(a–c). Educational research in Welsh higher education institutions – RAE performance**(a) 1992**

Institution	Staff returned		
	Grade	Proportion	Numbers
University of Glamorgan	2	B	8.0
Swansea Institute of Higher Education	1	E	11.0
University College of Wales, Aberystwyth	3	A	22.0
University College of North Wales, Bangor	3	B	15.5
University of Wales College of Cardiff	3	C	17.5
University College, Swansea	3	B	25.0
Total			99.0

(b) 1996

Institution	Staff returned		
	Grade	Proportion	Numbers
North East Wales Institute of Higher Education	2	E	4.0
University of Wales, Bangor	3a	D	11.2
University of Wales, Swansea	3a	B	32.2
Swansea Institute of Higher Education	1	C	6.0
University of Wales, Aberystwyth	3b	C	14.0
University of Wales, Cardiff	4	B	22.1
University of Wales Institute, Cardiff	1	E	14.0
Total			103.5

(c) 2001

Institution	Staff returned		
	Grade	Proportion	Numbers
North East Wales Institute of Higher Education	2	E	8.0
University of Wales, Bangor	3a	F	9.7
UW, Swansea	3a	B	23.8
Swansea Institute of Higher Education	2	F	2.0
University of Wales, Aberystwyth	3a	B	11.6
Cardiff University	5*	A	22.3
Total			77.4

* (Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England)

Whatever the causes of this pattern of performance in university-based educational research in Wales, it is clear that funding has played a significant role. Quite simply, the relatively poor RAE performance of Welsh universities in education has translated into the progressive tightening of funding. One of the complexities of the UK's devolved system of governance is that, although the RAE is conducted on a UK-wide basis, decisions as to how RAE performance is translated into decisions about funding is a matter for the Welsh Assembly Government (implemented through the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales). Accordingly, up until the 2004–2005 allocation in Wales, QR funding was allocated through the block grant to support research in those institutions which achieved ratings of 3a/3b and above in the RAE. In this, the Welsh system was different from those in England and Scotland, where the cut-off for QR funding was set at grade 4. The variation was justified in terms of the “particular characteristics” of research in the Welsh higher education institutions (which cynics translated as the generally poor RAE ratings). However, from 2004–2005 onwards, the allocation system in Wales was brought into line with the rest of the UK, as it became impossible to sustain financially Wales's alternative system of QR allocation.

The consequences for educational research in Wales have been stark. Only Cardiff University now receives QR funding to support core research activities in education. In the 2006–2007 allocation, for example, Cardiff received some £1.04 million to fund its educational research; all the other Welsh institutions received nothing (although institutions may decide to subsidise educational research from QR income received for other research areas) (http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/FinanceAssurance_Docs/Annex_B.pdf).³

So only in one university in Wales has funding to provide staff with the time and basic resources to conduct educational research. To put this in another way, there are a number of Welsh universities (Aberystwyth, Bangor and Swansea, in particular), which historically received QR funding (and its precursors) but now no longer do so. Swansea University closed its education department, and transferred its initial teacher training and almost all the staff to The Swansea Institute of HE (now Swansea Metropolitan University) after the 2001 RAE.

Moreover, although educational researchers who are not supported through the QR allocation remain eligible to raise money for particular projects from the government, the Research Councils and other sources such as charities or local government, it is in reality extremely difficult to do so. A vicious circle sets in. *Past* performance of raising grant income is itself one of the factors which influence RAE ratings. Certainly, outside Cardiff, educational grant income has been relatively low in Welsh higher education institutions. Table 2 shows the average educational grant income to higher education institutions for each member of “research active” staff returned to the 2001 RAE. The figures for Wales exclude Cardiff University, as the latter's educational research is reported under the HESA category “Social Studies”.

Table 2. Average educational research income per member of staff (£ thousands)

Country	Financial year			
	2001-2	2002-3	2003-4	2004-5
Wales	15.7	10.1	9.6	12.2
England	21.7	25.9	29.2	31.5
Scotland	24.1	27.4	32.2	33.8
Northern Ireland	37.3	19.1	38.1	31.5

(Source: HESA and Higher Education Funding Council for England)

Whilst the data here need to be treated with some caution, the disparity between the figures for Welsh HEIs outside Cardiff and the averages for the other countries of the UK is very striking. Moreover, there is little in the Welsh figures to parallel the strongly rising trends for England and Scotland. Therefore, researchers in these Welsh institutions are faced with the task of increasing their levels of project-related funding from a comparatively low base, whilst at the same time having to cope with the loss of QR allocation, without ESRC-funded PhD students, and delivering teacher training courses for 36 weeks of the year. Given these circumstances, it is difficult to see that *future* performance will be characterised by anything other than further decline. The results of the 2008 RAE are released in December 2008, funding consequences are announced in Spring 2009. Any discussion of the scholarly identities of educational researchers in Wales has to take place against the background of these data.

Scholarly identities

Data are not available to investigate the scholarly identities of educational researchers in Wales. Before discussing what evidence does exist, there is one “complication” that needs to be stressed, because it makes problematic the very topic of scrutiny. There are people employed outside Wales whose work is on Wales (John Evans and Dawn Penney work in England and Australia) but have studied PE and Welsh identity (Penney & Evans, 1999); academics employed in Wales whose research is not on Wales – for example, Delamont researched and wrote the ORACLE transfer studies about three English cities while working in Wales (Delamont & Galton, 1986); and not all the educational researchers in Wales are employed in the education departments. Key investigations into Welsh medium schooling have been conducted by people in Psychology, Linguistics or Welsh language departments, for example. There are strong Psychology departments conducting some educational research, and research of educational relevance. Career mobility means that several scholars have been employed in Wales at some points in their career, but not when Welsh research is reported (e.g. John Furlong: see Furlong & White, 2002; Furlong, Hagger & Butcher, 2006). So it is not at all clear who “the scholars” are, which compounds the scarcity of data on their “identities”. We do have autobiographical accounts of specific projects (Pugsley, 2002) but most of these are about doing a PhD project. It is possible to do an analysis of the *Welsh Journal of Education* and education papers in the generic social science journal *Contemporary Wales*, to get a “take” on topic choice, but here the impact of the RAE is incalculable. If researchers believe that RAE panels will devalue papers in the *Welsh Journal of Education* or *Contemporary Wales* compared to papers in *British Journal of Sociology of Education* or *Research Papers in Education*, they will choose not to submit to the former journals. We wonder whether one consequence of the six RAEs has been researchers focusing *away* from Wales. A key criterion for receiving high grades in the RAE, is the *international* dimension of research. While “international” can be variously interpreted, there is a danger that research by those *in Wales on Wales* will be seen as parochial in nature.

Some things are clear. Researchers, who are Welsh speakers, and especially those who do research on the Welsh medium schools or the role of Welsh in education (formal or non-formal), have a clear scholarly identity. Wales has had Welsh medium schools for over fifty years, and their development role in the preservation of the Welsh language, and impact on issues, such as educational markets and parental choice, have been of interest not only to Welsh researchers but to scholars wherever bilingualism or the preservation of minority or indigenous languages are under discussion (e.g. Brittany, the Basque country, Canada and New Zealand). Investigating Welsh medium education involves those who have a clearly defined Welsh scholarly identity. Of course such people have *other* scholarly identities as well: as British, European, Marxist, Psychologist or whatever. Such a description would apply to Godfrey Harrison (1978), Colin Baker (2004) and Jonathan Scourfield (Scourfield, Davies & Holland, 2004). Some other social scientists, while not identifying primarily as educational researchers have written on educational topics as part of their more general Welsh scholarly identity: William Housley (2006) is one example. Again such academics

have an unequivocally “Welsh” identity. We would argue that the RAE has not changed the scholarly identity of those Welsh academics.

For all other educational researchers, however, the impact of the RAE since 1992 has been profound: and for Cardiff-based authors to write about it is itself a form of cultural imperialism or hegemonic discourse. Writing provocatively, it seems likely that the scholarly identity of an educational researcher employed in Cardiff University since the 1996 RAE is completely different from that of such a researcher employed anywhere else in Wales. The Quality Related (QR) Research money, ESRC recognition for PhD studentships, a clean record from QAA audits, and the physical proximity to the WAG, mean that Cardiff University researchers can feel secure in their scholarly identities, whether emphasising their Welshness or not. In contrast, staff employed in the other HEIs, without QR money or ESRC recognition, are unlikely to feel that they are well placed to be researchers, and even that their scholarly identity is not much valued in their HEI or even in Wales. The WAG has signalled that it values education and training, but the impact of the RAE has been to concentrate research in Cardiff University. There is a need for subaltern voices on this topic, perhaps expressing the views found in Sparkes (2007).

At the time of writing there are two new programmes, called WERN and WISERD, using WAG and ESRC funds to try to increase the research capacity in education of HEIs other than Cardiff. WERN (the Welsh Education Research Network) provides a small sum of money so teams of educational researchers can write grant applications. WISERD (the Welsh Institute for Social and Economic Research Data) is well funded but includes educational research as one small part of its remit. These follow the UK wide TLRP (Teaching and Learning Research Programme) an ESRC investment including capacity building in educational research. In all such programmes it is hard to see how small sums of short term grant money can create a research culture in HEIs that have no QR funds because of successive RAEs.

Conclusions

Welsh devolution has brought many changes to Wales, but our conclusion is that the deep rooted financial and structural implications of the UK wide policies of the QAA, ESRC and RAEs have had far more impact on educational research and researchers in Wales than the establishment of the Welsh Assembly Government.

Notes

1. This category understated the numbers of educational researchers, as those members of staff who were employed on fixed-term contracts, attached to particular research projects were (for the most part) excluded. And educational researchers returned to other subject panels, such as Psychology, Linguistics, or Social Policy do not appear in these tables (see Deem, 2004).
2. In England, by contrast, there were seven individual universities which each returned 50 or more “research-active” staff in education to the 2001 RAE.
3. This unevenness in the educational research allocation mirrors that for the overall QR distribution, where Cardiff received over £37 million in 2006–2007, with next largest allocation being £7.7 million to the University of Wales, Bangor.

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