

Executive summary

Evaluation of the centre for research on bilingualism in theory and practice

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Summary of the investment

The ESRC Centre for Research on Bilingualism in Theory and Practice (The Centre) was funded under the ESRC's *Collaborative Ventures Scheme* from 1 January 2007 to 30 June 2012. Of the £5.2 million investment in the Centre, £1.5 million was provided by HEFCW, the Welsh Government contributed £1 million and the remainder was funded by the ESRC. The Contract of Agreement was between the Centre and the ESRC. HEFCW was not involved in the academic management of the Centre.

Focussing on a shared interest concerning the relation between a bilingual's two languages, this cross-college cross-school Centre approached this issue from diverse methodological standpoints, conducting its research within five separate Research Groups: neuroscientific, experimental-developmental, corpus-based, survey and ethnographic, and phonological. The Centre hosted three international conferences; two national policy/practitioner conferences; 43 practitioner workshops; hosted 55 overseas visitors; arranged study visits for 80 Visiting Researchers and maintained a 62-strong Associate Researcher membership drawn from Bangor University and universities across the UK and many parts of the world.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation methodology included analysis of a wide variety of documents obtained from the ESRC, members of the Centre and other sources which included: the Centre's research proposal, grant letter and contract; Advisory Committee minutes; Troika minutes; Communications Strategies; Business Engagement Strategy; annual reports; forward plans; final report and nominated outputs, research articles, research instruments, and conference/workshop evaluation forms. 49 interviews were conducted with members of the Centre, academic and non-academic users. An additional six individuals provided written comments. 11 experts in the field of bilingualism provided written referee comments based upon their reading of the final report and the nominated outputs.

Aims and objectives

The Centre had considerable success in terms of meeting its objectives:

- There was success in each of the five Research Strands in terms of building and extending knowledge about some aspects of bilingualism and effectively engaging in discussions and debates concerning bilingualism with researchers in many parts of the world.
- With a very successful Visiting Researcher scheme, 62 Associate Researcher members and hosting three international conferences, the Centre succeeded in creating a dynamic and internationally well-respected cross-disciplinary research centre which made important contributions to extending UK-wide academic research-capacity building.
- The Centre was partially successful in its aim to develop strong bidirectional links with practitioners and policy-makers concerned with bilingualism in the UK, so as to ground research and theory in the needs of these users, as well as to ensure rapid dissemination and informed receipt of research findings to user groups.
- The Centre successfully expanded the expertise and research potential of bilingualism specialists at Bangor University by extending existing collaborations and developing new collaborations/input from other theorists. There was fruitful collaboration with, and input from, practitioners and policy makers, albeit to a lesser degree overall.
- The Centre was a successful “hub for interdisciplinary exchange”, particularly among junior researchers. That this was not as successful with more senior researchers is probably not surprising given the very different nature and scope of the research undertaken in each research strand. There was, however, some fruitful interdisciplinary collaboration between some of the senior Centre members.
- The Centre has succeeded in producing the highest quality intellectual contributions, producing a great deal of top quality scientific research published in some highly competitive venues, including top-ranked journals.
- All Research Groups have contributed extensively to knowledge transfer within the academic community. The transfer of research knowledge to non-academic audiences has taken place mainly in Wales and more frequently and extensively undertaken by some researchers more than others.
- In addition to securing an extra £4,531,799.67 of UK funding during its five years, the Centre attracted an additional €1,149,361 and \$1,032,960 from outside the UK Science Vote.

Management of the centre

The Centre Director, Professor Margaret Deuchar, was generally commended for her management of the Centre, given the enormous challenge of bridging the three Schools of Linguistics, Education and Psychology. The management structure of Centre Director, two Co-Directors and an Executive Committee comprising the head of each of the five research groups, a Welsh Language Liaison Officer and Publicity Officer seemed, on the whole, to be effective. With its strategic responsibility for the Centre’s performance, the Executive Committee was clearly very effective in ensuring that the Centre met and exceeded its academic quality and academic impact targets. While its engagement with policy makers and practitioners and non-academic impact was accomplished to some considerable degree, this aspect of the Centre’s intended work is likely to have been even more effective had the Executive Committee included an individual with specific responsibility for policy-maker and practitioner/community engagement. Furthermore, the

intention to create a Communications post and increase expenditure in this area from the £25,000 over five years included in the Centre's original budget to approximately £200,000 was not achieved and weakened the Centre's capacity to engage fully with the range of policy makers, practitioners and non-academic audiences identified in its Communications Strategy. Expenditure was kept within the required 5 per cent of the planned expenditure for each financial year. The Executive Committee appears to have functioned appropriately, although there was some frustration voiced that policy-maker/practitioner voices weren't always listened to by academic staff. It would appear that ongoing support for the Director and Centre might have been more effective if there had been more continuity of ESRC case officer and university management executive support throughout the duration of the Centre.

Contribution of individual research strands

Despite the wide range of research disciplines, the varying size and previous academic experience of research teams and the significantly different amounts of funding awarded to each group in total, every Group contributed significantly to the overall achievements of the Centre. The strengths of the neuroscientific, corpus-based, and phonological strands was their emphasis on 'pure science' and the investigation of theories of bilingualism through innovative methodological approaches. The strength of the survey and ethnographic group was their significant engagement with policy-makers and practitioners across each of their (mostly educational) studies. The experimental-developmental group's strength was its focus on developing theories of bilingualism combined with the practical development of bilingual language tests for application in specific clinical and educational practitioner contexts.

Impact and legacy

The Research Groups produced an impressive amount of high quality, widely disseminated academic research outputs. At the end of its five year grant period, the Centre's academic outputs included: 169 peer-reviewed journal articles and 57 book chapters, three corpora totalling 90 hours of recorded bilingual speech deposited with the Talkbank archive, a bilingual education training pack, bilingual language assessment tools; and the freely downloadable e-LiLT (electronic Longitudinal Intonation Learning Transcripts) corpus. The Centre has created resources which have long lasting value for some academics and practitioners. Moreover, with further papers and books forthcoming, the impact by publication is set to grow further considerably. The Centre produced 44 newspaper and online articles about their research and members of the Centre contributed to 36 radio and television programmes. Whilst there were some examples of effective impact on policy and practice, it was felt by some of those interviewed that this could have been more extensive. In those examples which best maximised the non-academic impact of research, either: i) the research had been initiated, commissioned, monitored and evaluated by the user, or ii) the research had been designed in close collaboration between academic researchers and policy-makers/practitioners. Several commentators felt that the lack of closer involvement between Welsh Government senior research officers and the Centre had led to a missed opportunity with regard to i) strengthening the Centre's bidirectional relationship with Welsh Government policy makers; and, potentially, ii) strengthening the Centre's direct and ongoing impact on policy and practice in the Welsh context, specifically. The Centre has made an important contribution to academic research capacity on bilingualism through its

182 weekly seminars, four AHRC and one ESRC-funded workshops and the new Bilingualism Pathway within the ESRC-funded all-Wales Doctoral Training Centre which will run for at least five years.

Conclusions and recommendations

The overall conclusion of this report is very positive. The ESRC/HEFCW/Welsh Government investment in this Centre has furthered the understanding of some aspects of bilingualism through a cross-disciplinary approach to high quality, methodologically innovative research. There has been a huge amount of effort expended upon producing an impressive number of outputs and engaging in dissemination and knowledge transfer activities. The Centre's contribution to academic research capacity building has been very effective. While there were examples of direct impact and relevance of some research to some policy-makers and practitioner groups in Wales, in particular, it was felt by some commentators that this could have been strengthened further and extended to engage with UK and EU agendas. Given the strong performance of the Centre overall, it is a shame that funding for an extension was not obtained.

Recommendations

- That a Research Organisation's deputy or pro-vice chancellor with responsibility for research be expected to line manage not only the Centre Director but also the Co-directors as well as having oversight of the performance and time commitments of other permanent Centre staff members.
- Future reviews of Research Centres would be facilitated if the ESRC office provided details such as, journal titles and the relationship of the primary author to the research investment, if these are not included in the final report.
- In future, and where possible or appropriate, that co-funding partners such as HEFCW/Welsh Government be involved at the outset/proposal stage in order that the bi-directional relationship with policy makers and non-academic impact be further strengthened.
- In future, co-funding partners such as HEFCW and, in particular, the Welsh Government should be involved in monitoring and evaluating the policy and practice impact of research Centres and in so doing potentially help strengthen the bi-directional links between policy-makers, practitioners and academic research.
- That ESRC Centres should identify the most effective way of presenting their academic research to non-specialist/non-academic audiences, perhaps in collaboration with practitioners/policy-makers, and that this form of dissemination be built into costs and staff responsibilities.
- That a Centre should have a designated 'Communications officer' who is responsible for engaging with policy makers and practitioners and communicating the Centre's work as a whole to potential non-academic audiences. This is likely to be a role for someone with specific PR and networking strengths and not necessarily an academic member of the Centre.
- That a Centre which aims to ground its research and theory in the needs of policy-makers and practitioners should have a series of specific mechanisms, such as a policy and practitioner forum, for engaging with them in that task.

- That greater detail of reporting should be adopted with regard to use of ESRC centre grants and identify, for example, what return was gained, from internal Research Development Fund 'pump-priming' in order to aid future evaluations of Centres.
- That the ESRC establish and facilitate small, thematically grouped Networks of Centre Directors in order to provide specific support and training for Centre Directors.
- With regard to Advisory Committees, it might be useful to consider enabling those members who have to travel from abroad or considerable distances within the UK to participate via video conference on the occasions they are unable to travel and to consider ways in which it is possible to circulate reports and matters for discussion which could be accessed remotely and commented upon when individuals are unable to attend in person.