

Evaluation of the Wales institute of social and economic research, data and methods

Executive summary

Professor David Parsons, Professor Rhodri Thomas and Kenneth Walsh (P&A Research and Consulting)

The Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) was funded from September 2008 to March 2012 by ESRC (£1,448,749) and HEFCW (£3,420,009), with co-funding also from the five university partners (Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff, Glamorgan and Swansea). WISERD was based on, and continues to operate, a cross institutional and multi-disciplinary partnership variously involving 58 researchers and diverse stakeholders across Wales.

The evaluation

P&A's summative evaluation, for ESRC and HEFCW, has looked at WISERD's achievement and impact against its objectives. Conducted in five-months from September 2012, it has drawn together:

- activity and documentary evidence
- an academic quality review
- interviews with 55 academics, project-managers, researchers, and external stakeholders
- five impact case studies

A separate analysis, also by P&A, has been reported of the WISERD-NCRM collaboration.

Aims and objectives

The evaluation concludes that WISERD objectives, and the targets set by ESRC and HEFCW, have been substantially met, with extensive academic outputs and potential for significant impact. WISERD's collaborative achievements have also been impressive especially when set against a background of (often) previously limited inter-institutional co-operation. These successes have been achieved despite a slow start to building some aspects of capacity, but with much subsequently achieved in delivery across its four 'core' work programmes, as well as in securing substantial additional external funding, and in building the potential for long-term sustainability. Only in those aspects of WISERD objectives concerned with collaboration with NCRM, is there evidence of a shortfall in meeting aims, and this limited to perhaps unrealistic aspirations for R and D collaboration.

Academic quality and achievements

The evaluation shows strong academic achievements from:

- over 430 published and related outputs (including 122 peer-reviewed journal papers; eight books/edited collections; 57 chapters/contributions to books; 145 conference papers)
- diverse knowledge exchange and dissemination events (three annual conferences - 342 delegates; 41 training events/workshops - 350 participants, over 80 seminars)

The quality of these outputs has been good, with (nominated) review papers all assessed as 'internationally excellent' (3*) or 'internationally recognised' (2*) against the REF 2014 classification. Each also had robust methodological foundations, although with outputs overall having scope for greater theoretical insights and integration across the various work-streams. Other evidence shows:

- extensive methodological development, notably in data integration, and in Locality Studies among others (WISERD's focus has been largely on Welsh-based research and analysis, including some comparative studies, but otherwise as yet with limited international focus)
- capacity building in the partnership has been extensive, combining widening expertise through project working, knowledge-exchange, and formal training and development courses
- academic skills development events have been guided by a systematic training needs assessment, have been well supported and regarded, although skills development events to meet diagnosed needs for advanced quantitative methods have not been given a high priority
- skills training has engaged some non-academic bodies but with great scope to extend this

Inter-institutional collaboration has been substantial, achieved from a low baseline, and now establishing a distinct 'WISERD brand' inside and outside these institutions. Evidence also shows:

- cross-institutional team working embedded in 11 of the 12 the WISERD work-streams;
- extensive inter-institutional co-operation in securing additional external research funds (nearly half of 110 research applications were successful, securing £5.9 million of added funding);
- sustained but uneven breadth of collaboration across partners (most limited for Glamorgan), with some gaps in the depth of engagement of key established research centres in Wales.

Inter-institutional co-operation between the partner institutions has deepened through opportunities for collaborative research, joint development and capacity building. However, WISERD has been more effective at deepening collaborations in the partners than extending co-operation in other universities in Wales (although many outside the partnership have a shallow social science research base).

Non-academic engagement and impact

The evaluation suggests that WISERD relationships with the Welsh Government, although slow to start, have developed significantly in the second half of this first funding period. This has included knowledge exchange fellowships, shared priorities and regular (quarterly) review meetings, cross-policy themed evidence symposia, and ad hoc joint activities including engagement of senior WISERD and associated staff on Welsh Government advisory and working groups. Other evidence shows:

- some success in engaging with other ‘central’ government agencies and non-departmental bodies in, or based in, Wales
- limited engagement (beyond evidence gathering) with the third sector although with an important exception in research and knowledge exchange collaboration with Shelter-Cymru
- limited engagement elsewhere in the public sector (other than in evidence collection) and very little with the private sector

Non-academic impacts have been difficult to identify, partly because it remains early days for securing policy and practice impacts, but also because of limited available impact evidence, with evident weaknesses in WISERD’s assessment and monitoring of non-academic impacts. However, a series of impact case studies in the evaluation show some early gains especially for Welsh Government policy-makers, and with further impact potential. In these, the main impact ‘enablers’ have been the quality of:

- WISERD research and analytical inputs; delivery and product responsiveness
- hub support to research teams
- ‘seamless’ inter-institutional collaboration
- the quality of working relationships building trust and confidence

The ability of WISERD to put together multi-functional and cross-disciplinary teams has also been critical to delivery especially in the additionally funded projects.

Management of the investment/funding scheme

Inter-institutional ‘hub and spoke’ management arrangements have worked robustly, and notably through the collegiate working of the five Co-Directors with devolved responsibilities in the highly effective Executive Group. There has been some lack of clarity in the multi-tier management structure notably on ‘external’ strategic oversight roles between the Advisory Group and Troika meetings, and the added-value for WISERD of the Advisory Group has been limited. The Directors’ role, its support and inter-relationships, have been well conceived, and well-regarded, inside and outside the partnership. However, there was some loss of Direction momentum in the immediate post-formation stages as a result of the greatly extended period for recruiting the (anticipated) replacement to the first Director (Prof Huw Beynon). Both Prof Beynon and Prof Rees subsequently have brought distinct skill-sets to Direction leadership and development, and latterly to developing sustainability, with capable cross-institutional support to Directors and Co-Directors, and teams, in particular from the WISERD Director of Operations.

Conclusions and recommendations

The evaluation acknowledges the considerable successes achieved by WISERD in building a co-operative platform for its future sustainability. It also suggests a number of areas for further development to build on these foundations, including: reviewing the arrangements for intra-HEI pro-activity to help widen multi-disciplinary capabilities; assessing the expertise legacy now built up and the implications for the future work programme balance between current/emerging 'relevant' policy research and pursuing areas of existing conceptual or methodological interest; reviewing the balance needed between 'in-Wales/wider than Wales' research and including international capabilities; re-energising the currently moribund thematic networks for knowledge exchange and external inter-face; establishing effective recording and monitoring of impact achievements and related outcomes; and reviewing the sustainable capacity for identifying and securing external research funds.

Specific recommendations are also put forward for ESRC and HEFCW for guiding possible future inter-institutional investments, in particular: ensuring contractual obligations and monitoring arrangements provide for coherent, continuous and well-resourced partnership leadership; ensuring investment schedules build in sufficient lead-times for the set-up of collaborative Centre's; providing clearer articulation of internal management (and wider governance) with funding and impact oversight; reviewing the scope for setting up a practice-based review of 'hub-and-spoke' type collaborations to support future guidance on delivery models; and reviewing also scope, needs and expectations for funded Centres to develop and produce 'upstream' impact goals within an impact framework plan of anticipated and measurable outcomes.