



FEATURE

Research capacity building Scottish style: The Applied Educational Research Scheme in action

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Research capacity building Scottish style: The Applied Educational Research Scheme in action

*Networking has proved an exciting and sometimes exacting learning curve,
says Pamela Munn*

The Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) is a £2 million five-year programme aimed at developing educational research capacity in Scotland. It is jointly funded by the Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED). The background to the establishment of AERS was described by Steve Baron, Programme Co-ordinator, in an earlier edition of *Education in the North*. Key features of that background may be summarised as follows:

- the recognition of the need to invest in educational research capacity in Scotland in the context of the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise in which no Scottish education outlet was rated 5 or 5*; furthermore, only four of the seven universities with faculties of education were rated so as to receive research funding;
- the encouragement by the then Scottish Higher Education Funding Council of research collaboration among Scottish universities;
- the opportunities to enhance educational research presented by the mergers of all the former teacher education colleges with universities;
- a rethinking of the relationship between policy and research within the Scottish Executive Education Department to encompass concepts and theories to help inform policy development, as well as more traditional interests in the evaluation of policy initiatives and in the 'what works' agenda.

A further important piece of context is the demographic profile of those working in the social sciences in general and in education in particular. The recent review commissioned by ESRC reveals that more than 50% of staff are aged 50 or over. Some of this profile may be explained by time spent in school teaching or other forms of professional practice before taking up a career in higher education. Nevertheless, the demography signals an urgent need to ensure that there is a vibrant and well-trained new generation of educational researchers to contribute to what will remain a key

public policy area. AERS thus represents a significant opportunity to develop and enhance research capacity in Scotland.

The AERS networks

AERS is organised in terms of three substantive networks and one generic network whose remit is research training. This generic network has a responsibility to develop an MSc in research training which will meet ESRC recognition criteria, and to provide a range of ad hoc training which will meet the needs of those working in the substantive networks. The intention is that the MSc will provide a framework for the five of the seven faculties of education who currently do not have ESRC recognition to develop and submit their own programmes for ESRC recognition. The MSc is being developed as an online resource and as a freely available public good for all universities and educational researchers to use as appropriate.

The substantive networks are broadly conceived, each driven by theoretical concerns, and each committed to three particular research projects. Each network is located in one of the three universities forming the AERS consortium and each is led by a network convener and a senior research fellow with clerical support. Thus, the Learners, Learning and Teaching network is based in the University of Strathclyde, led by Professor Donald Christie and Mr Alistair Wilson; Schools and Social Capital is based in the University of Stirling and led by Professor Julie Allan and Dr Ralph Catts; and the School Management and Governance network is based in the University of Edinburgh and led by Professor David Raffe, Dr Joan Stead and Dr Jane Brown. The leading of the networks involves both creating interest in the network through a series of events and seminars and sustaining momentum within projects. Each project has a Principal Investigator whose role also involves research capacity building among a wider range of colleagues than would be conventional in a more traditionally organised research project.

In thinking through network organisation and management, AERS has developed a framework for participation so that all concerned can consider the nature and extent of the involvement. Level 1, the

most popular level, commits participants to being on mailing lists and receiving information about network events and outputs. Level 2 implies a more direct involvement in project work but to a lesser extent than Level 3, which commits participants to a specific time commitment. In addition, AERS has provision for 18 non-stipendiary fellows, who sign a fellowship agreement committing them to spending specific amounts of time in particular projects. These agreements are co-signed by fellows' line managers, signalling an institutional commitment to time being spent on AERS activities. In return, AERS provides travel and subsistence and on the job training. The AERS Fellows are seen as the next generation of principal investigators.

Activities and progress

From the outset, AERS was committed to a collaborative and inclusive approach to building networks and to taking forward the programme as a whole. It has been very important to encourage the involvement of staff in all seven education faculties in Scotland and to extend an open invitation to policy-makers and practitioners. The following gives a flavour of the range of work undertaken to raise awareness of the programme as whole and to build networks.

- Visits to Vice-Chancellors of the four non-consortium universities and meetings with Deans of Education to gain support for AERS and encourage active participation by staff;
- 'Roadshows' in various parts of Scotland to present the idea of networks and stimulate discussion and debate about AERS;
- An annual forum in which to present AERS and report progress. The launch forum was held in Edinburgh in 2004, and opened by Robert Brown MSP, then Chair of the Parliament's Education Committee, now Deputy Minister for Education and Young People. The 2005 forum was held in Glasgow, with the title, Linking Research, Policy and Practice. The keynote speaker was Maggi Allan, Chair of the Steering Board for *A Curriculum for Excellence* (ACfE) and there have been subsequent explorations about the ways in which AERS could support this important programme of curriculum reform. Part of the ACfE project has involved AERS, under the leadership of Professor Donald Christie, in the literature reviews to underpin the review of specific curriculum areas. The 2006 forum will be held in collaboration with the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme in November and will continue with the theme of linking research, policy and practice. An interim forum was held in June to take forward common themes arising from the networks in preparation for a special issue of *Scottish Educational Review* in 2007.
- *The Learners, Learning and Teaching* network, as part of Project 1, has stimulated at least 10 communities of enquiry, ranging over such diverse fields as, for example, exploring citizenship, a school-based project in Jordanhill School, Glasgow; Assessment is for Learning, supported by Glasgow City Council Education Service for Aifl co-ordinators; and Social and Emotional Development Research Group, a multidisciplinary group exploring the social and emotional development in young people. Some of these communities of enquiry are now the focus of research exploring processes and outcomes. A core team of nine colleagues from the Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Strathclyde, Aberdeen City Council, and HMIE have met on a monthly basis to take forward this work. The LLT network has two other project teams of similar size working on Teachers as Learners (Project 2) and Pupil Engagement (Project 3).
- *The School Management and Governance* network has held two well-attended seminars on Ambitious, Excellent Schools and on citizenship and democracy in schools, the subject of one of its major projects. It has carried out a literature review on the concept of citizenship and undertaken an analysis of some key Scottish policy documents. An article by Mike Cowie and Linda Croxford, reporting the results of part of Project 1, exploring how schools measure their own performance, appeared in a previous edition of *Education in the North*. Project 3, examining changing patterns of school management since devolution, has already engaged in its first round of case studies.
- *The Schools and Social Capital* network has completed its first project, which concerned the definition of social capital in the context of inequalities in education and the identification of issues in relation to theory, current policies and research. Publications arising from this project are expected shortly and these will complement the working papers which can be accessed via the website (www.aers.ac.uk). Project 2 is now underway. This involves identifying the implications for the professional practice on teachers and other school personnel of the use of social

capital to address inequalities in educational outcomes. This network has also developed a newsletter as a means of communicating with network members.

- *The Research Capacity Building* network is currently piloting an MSc at the University of Strathclyde and the first cohort of students has embarked upon the core modules. Responsive mode training on, for example, literature searches and reviews and on using software to analyse qualitative data has also been provided.

Possibilities and constraints

As might be expected, a great deal of time in the early stages of AERS has been devoted to establishing and developing networks. This has taken longer than originally expected and has been an exciting and sometimes exacting learning experience for all concerned as ways of working have had to be established from first principles. Building trust takes time and day-to-day relationships in the networks, projects and across the scheme as a whole have necessarily been accompanied by the development of internal and external governance structures, reporting protocols and mechanisms for accountability. These mechanisms, in turn, take time to bed down and to feature in work routines.

Having spent a good deal of time on the processes of networking, it is critical that the scheme is able to deliver research and research training outputs which will be valuable in themselves and recognised as such by the funders and by the wider education community. AERS can point to 60 staff in universities who were participating at Level 3 in various projects in 2005, compared to 36 in 2004. Twelve Fellowships have been taken up with the remaining six being advertised in the latter half of 2006. Beyond this substantial achievement in terms of process, AERS has to be able to demonstrate that it is conducting high quality research whose findings are of interest. It is now in the process of developing a publications and communications strategy to ensure maximum awareness and impact of its work. It is anticipated that over the next year a number of jointly authored publications will emerge from the nine projects in the three substantive networks. A special issue of *Scottish Educational*

Review to appear in 2007 will contain a number of papers that draw on research across networks to provide insight into, for example, teacher professionalism and the progress of the lowest performing 20 per cent of pupils in terms of the national priorities for education. To facilitate this process of publication and communication, and to maximise connections among networks, AERS has recently appointed a Research and Knowledge Transfer Fellow. On the research training front, an MSc which commands the confidence of research managers in Scotland and beyond has to be delivered, and a vibrant network of people committed to developing research training has to be developed and sustained.

There are two major constraints on AERS maximising its full potential for building research capacity. The first of these relates the unprecedented increase in the numbers of students taking part in initial teacher education programmes 2004-07. This increase is part of the strategy to decrease class sizes in Primary 1 and in English and Mathematics classes in the early years of secondary. Although the increase in student numbers is very welcome in the broader scheme of things, it has strained the ability of experienced initial teacher education staff to participate in AERS as fully as they would like. Increased student numbers have brought additional resources to the universities and thus enabled additional staff to be employed. However, experienced staff have necessarily been at the forefront of planning, monitoring and quality assuring the provision for additional students. Secondly, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has inevitably focused attention on individual institutional submissions in education. Collaboration has not yet reached the stage where one Scottish submission can be planned. This ambitious goal may be realised in a future RAE should there be one. For the moment, AERS has achieved a great deal and is on the way to achieving more. We are in the process of a mid-term evaluation which will inform our future plans. Watch this space!

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