

A scoping study to map research capacity in health social welfare voluntary organisations in Wales, with a focus on BME organisations and equalities agencies

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Key Points

- The main areas of work undertaken by the organisations that took part in this study are: providing specialised and culturally sensitive services to stakeholders, empowering individuals, groups and organisations through information exchanges and capacity building, and third, addressing race inequality and promoting social justice in Wales.
- The research undertaken by this sub-sector is increasing to grow in volume and in areas of focus.
- The barriers to conducting high quality research included time constraints, infrastructure problems and the expertise needed in research formulation, design and execution.
- Respondents identified partnerships as one way to overcome some of the difficulties they faced, with partnerships seen as key to the development of uniform standards, the reduction of duplication of research, and a way in which to explore and respond to research capacity needs more effectively.
- Recommendations from the study include the development of simplified best practice manuals (research protocols and procedures), and further research on how best academic institutions can engage and develop effective and long term research partnerships with the BME third sector in Wales.

This study explores the perceived need, possible barriers to, and the opportunities for, developing sustainable research capacity in BME voluntary organisations. This study was conducted as part of a five year national programme of research and development (2005-2010) that was funded by the Welsh Assembly Government's National Institute of

Social Care and Health Research (formerly the Wales Office of Research and Development in Health and Social Care). The study was conducted by the Wales Equality and Diversity in Health and Social Care Research and Support Service (WEDHS); this Service has since become to the Wales Ethnicity Research Collaboration (WERC).



Wales Ethnicity Research Collaboration
Cydweithrediad Ymchwil Ethnigrwydd Cymru



Background

Despite the growing importance of the third sector, there remains in Wales a paucity of data on the role that BME voluntary organisations are playing in the development of a rigorous, readily accessible research evidence base. Although some work has been done in this area (Saltus et al. 2005), the nature, extent and impact of research conducted by community and voluntary organisations, especially research on health and social care needs, has yet to be adequately collated, archived and made readily available. Moreover, the type of research taking place, the role that clients and members of the public play, and the lessons that can be learned and transferred to other sectors regarding participatory methodologies in operation, have yet to be mapped.

Specific Objectives

- To assess the research capacity needs of voluntary organisations in Wales.
- To explore the perceived need, possible barriers to, and opportunities of developing and strengthening research capacity in voluntary organisations.

As a scoping study, the aim was also to develop and test a conceptual framework that could be used in larger studies in the future.

Research Approach

A conceptual framework to assess an organisation's ability to effectively conduct research was developed. As presented in Figure 1, (page 3) these dimensions were placed within the context of the external environment, and then linked to four key areas underpinning a VO's internal environment: (i) the leadership, (ii) the culture of the VO, (iii) the structure of the organisation, (iv) the people or human resources within an organisation, including its partnership links. Rooted in this framework, an online questionnaire was designed comprising ten questions. The questionnaire included space for free text responses aimed at giving respondents the opportunity to express their perceptions and opinions in their own words. The questionnaire was piloted with six organisations and refined as per their recommendations. Questionnaires were sent by email to 15 VOs. High-level members (Directors, CEOs and Coordinators) of the eight VOs completed the questionnaire covering the work of 47 members of staff. Eight of the 15 selected BME organisations completed and returned the questionnaire, giving the study a 53% response rate. The data were analysed using an online survey programme,

surveymonkey.com. The data were also checked manually for errors, and to aid in the analysis of the free text responses.

The sample

In terms of size, length of service and funding sources, all the VOs that participated in the study operate with a small to medium level of staff (3-9 members per organisation) and a varying number of volunteers. Over half the VOs have been in operation since 2000, with one established in 1976 and two in the early 1990s. All the VOs we targeted secured funding from local authorities and departments within the Welsh Assembly Government, as well as via funding bodies dedicated to funding charitable organisations. Regarding geographical coverage, the core services offered by two VOs were on a local basis, with one VO providing services on a regional level. The majority provided the bulk of their services locally or regionally, with their policy development work conducted on an all-Wales level. All of the organisations that participated in this study have mission statements that focus on improving the lives of BME people. With a focus on health (i.e., mental health, disability and chronic illness), social welfare (i.e., domestic violence and social exclusion), the aim was to deliver a range of services (e.g., information, advocacy, mentoring, awareness raising, training and outreach), that were designed specifically for their client groups. As such, the mission statements, manifestos and other related documentation underpinning the work of the VOs revealed a high level of commitment to addressing racism and other societal discrimination (by status, gender or by physical or mental ability) faced by their constituents.

Key findings

- The research undertaken by this sub-sector is growing
- There is a perceived need to strengthen research capacity within this sector.
- When asked if research activity was part of the organisation's key activities, all respondents except one indicated that it was. At least 75% of respondents said that they routinely read policy documents and wrote proposals, undertook research activities such as conducting surveys, facilitating focus groups and interviews, and that they produced evidence-based material. All respondents reported that their organisation was connected with, or had experience of working with, research active institutions (i.e., higher education, NHS and other third sector organisations).

Conceptual Framework to assess a voluntary organisational capacity to do research.

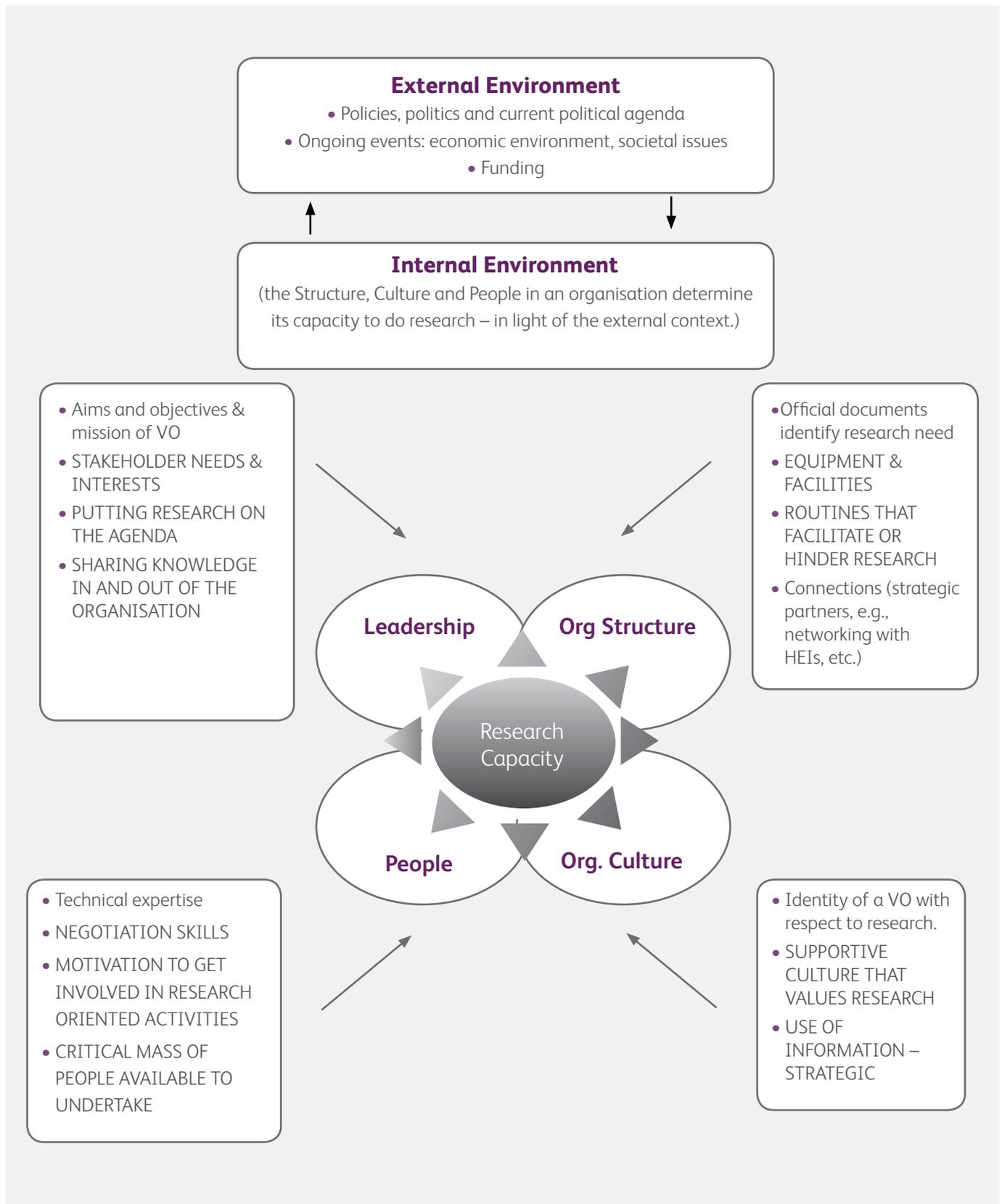


Figure 1 Organisational capacity to do research refers to the resources, knowledge and processes employed by the organisation. External environment refers to the context, which influences research activities in an organisation, e.g. funding. Internal environment refers to factors that influence the direction of the organisation, e.g. leadership and management



- On the type of research experience and training available to the organisation, 50% reported that they had staff trained in research methods and approaches and 37% reported they worked collaboratively with researchers or academics on all the projects.
- To gain more insight into the type of research and the complexity of the work, the respondents were asked to list the titles of the research projects undertaken. The studies listed included literature reviews, social-political studies, qualitative surveys and quantitative research projects. The areas examined included community participation integration, service needs and gaps, social care issues and the needs of family carers. The titles of projects also included scoping studies on BME health and healthcare needs, discrimination, equality and diversity issues, racism in schools and workplaces, forced marriages, female genital mutilation, human trafficking and prostitution.
- The responses to the question on how the organisations conducted the funded research projects showed that about 60% of the surveyed organisations conducted their research within the organisation, while 25% commissioned all their research work and 50% conducted research in partnership with other organisations. One VO both commissioned and conducted studies. The majority of partnerships and/or collaborations involved only one research partner; in a few cases, however, up to 14 partners were involved. The number of studies conducted by the individual VOs between 2003 and 2008 ranged from one to four, with the number of individual researchers involved ranging from one to six.
- On the perceived need and possible barriers to research, those who responded to this question reported that “*time constraints*” and “*expertise*” in research formulation, design and execution, including access to statistical analysis packages and relevant journals, were among the major barriers to research in the third sector. This was stated by respondents including those who indicated that they had access to strategic partners.
- Of those who completed this section (n = 6), 50% indicated that the lack of staff with research experience hindered research activity, with a slightly higher percentage of respondents (66%) indicating that not having the appropriate training or strategic partners also hindered research activity. One respondent included a comment in the answer, and

stated that “*most 3rd sector organisations lack the infrastructure to support research*”.

- The question on how best to strengthen research capacity in voluntary organisations generated comments ranging from the need for editorial support, advice on how to access funding, training and advice on statistical methods to linkages and partnerships. From the data it is clear that many respondents felt that links with research active institutions would strengthen their organisation’s research capacity. One respondent stated:

“Closer partnership with BME academics and research departments to enable us to carry out research with BME communities with the aim of enhancing their quality of life and appropriate opportunities. Close links with these academics and departments would also be a valuable way of hopefully training staff appropriately in the research field and keeping them up to date with new types of software and data analysis.”

Conclusion

The research framework developed for this study proved to be a useful tool that can be used to test a VO capacity for research and to support the VOs to assess and put in place dimensions that support best practise in research. However, of all the dimensions detailed in the research framework, it became clear that more attention must be given in future studies to the organisational dimensions, and to the links between research, organisational culture and the wider, external drivers operating in the voluntary sector. For rooted in the fact that, faced with a limited and insecure funding base, pressures to conform to market-based and more formal and professionalised structures, for the VOs, the commissioning, conducting and disseminating of research is not only deemed necessary, but is also seen as a way in which to evidence capacity and their competitive edge. This scoping study has revealed a need to focus on research partnerships as a way in which to strengthen research capacity within the BME voluntary sector. Further research in the area of equitable partnership arrangements for the mutual benefit of academic researchers and BME third sector organisations needs to be undertaken.

Cited reference

Saltus, R., Hawthorn, K., Karani, G., Johnson, M., Kaur-Mann, K., Merrell, J., Olumide, J., Rance, J. and Williams, C. (2005) Scoping Study to Explore the Feasibility of a Health and Social Care Research and Development Network covering Black and Minority Ethnic Groups in Wales. Report for Wales Office of Research and Development (WORD).

A scoping study to map research capacity in health social welfare voluntary organisations in Wales, with a focus on BME organisations by Dr Susanah Kimani and Dr Roiyah Saltus is available online at www.werconline.org.uk