

## **From engagement to outcomes: measuring the impact of researcher training using the Rugby Team Impact framework (0163)**

**Thomson** Christopher <sup>1</sup>, Barbara Allan<sup>1</sup>, <sup>1</sup>*University of Hull, Business School, Hull, United Kingdom*

### **Abstract:**

This study addresses our approach to the difficult task of measuring the impact of an eLearning service, the Graduate Virtual Research Environment (GVRE), provided to doctoral students at a UK University since October 2009. The GVRE provides research students with access to a training needs analysis tool which is linked to a repository of video learning resources created by academics and experienced research students. This paper explores the use of the Rugby Team Impact Framework as a guide to measuring impact and our use of a number of techniques to gather evidence about the changes resulting from use of the GVRE. The framework gives four levels of evidence, starting with simple measures of provision, through attendance, interest and to outcomes. As with other research, we found the former easy to assess but the outcomes harder to define. We conclude with a critical evaluation of our research process and outcomes.

### **Outline:**

Early career research staff were identified as a group which needed enhanced training by the Roberts Report in the UK (Roberts, 2002). This was followed by a UK government drive that was supported by funds to provide this training. As the initial ring fenced funding is coming to an end (Corbyn, 2009; RCUK, 2010) it has been necessary to demonstrate the impact of the funds committed to date in order for both national and institutional decisions to be made on the way forward. The Rugby Team Impact Framework (RTIF) (Bromley, Metcalfe, & Park, 2008) has been developed to give a common reference point to compare both evaluation methods and initiatives enacted across UK higher education institutions.

In this presentation we will address our approach to the difficult task of measuring the impact of an eLearning service, the Graduate Virtual Research Environment (GVRE), provided to doctoral students at a UK University since October 2009 using the RTIF. The development of the eLearning service was funded through the University's Roberts funds. The GVRE is composed of a training needs analysis tool and this is linked to a repository of learning resources i.e. video reflections made by staff and students of the University. The videos focus on skills awareness and essential points rather than in depth training which is delivered by other courses and available text books. We classify each of the videos into the skills it addresses in the Research Councils' Joint Skills Statement (JSS)(UK Research Councils & UK GRAD, 2001). In assessing the eLearning service we identified short term and long term goals. Our short term goal was to ensure that the participants found it useful and effective in terms of developing their research and employability skills. From a medium term perspective, we wanted to find out if participants were making more informed decisions about their development needs, and therefore, in the long term, improving their academic and career outcomes.

The RTIF is structured with five evidence levels which represent high levels of impact, but it is also more difficult to show the higher level impact is caused by the original intervention. Full details of the RTIF are available, but here we summarise the main features of the levels (Bromley, Metcalfe, & Park, 2008). Level 0 is a measurement of infrastructure provided, notably the areas of training provided and the number of researchers taking up the training. Level 1 relates to the reaction of students to the training and their views shortly after using it. Level 2 is about what the student learns as a result of the training, this is often measured through self report questionnaires sometime after the training. Level 3 is a measurement of how the students change behaviour based on what they have learnt. Level 4 is measured by outcomes, in the form of enhanced understanding and awareness in general. So whilst it might be hard to accurately demonstrate that students find it easier to pass their viva or publish papers as a result of their use of the GVRE, we may be able to ask students what helped them.

Several studies have already used the RTIF successfully; six were published last year as a review of the framework (Bromley, 2009). A mixture of evaluation methods is illustrated by these examples, which are all concerned with assessing face to face interventions. Outcomes were measured with skills surveys, focus groups, invited reflections and targeted surveys, plus evidence of grant applications. Most of these instruments were able to reflect a tight focus of the training delivered. An important part of many of the methods was to make measurements some time after the original intervention. With much broader coverage and an emphasis on awareness these methods were not directly transferable to this study. Our assessment method was aimed at gathering evidence of the impact of the GVRE at the different levels of impact we used different methods to capture these.

At level 0 we used the JSS to categorise all the video resources available, with this we were then able use visitor statistics to work out what skills participants were focusing on, as well as reviewing our provision across the spectrum of skills doctoral students require. We will present how this data is mapped against the usage statistics to demonstrate which skills areas attracted the most attention. We have also tracked links that participants share with other doctoral students and will discuss how this might be used to discover the questions most asked by early career researchers.

At level 1 we used focus groups to discuss the GVRE with users (Thomson & Allan, 2009; Thomson & Allan, 2010). This showed that students were most keen to access the resources at important transitions in their research (such in preparation for the viva), to review what came next. Whilst they were keen to network with research subjects and experts in their field they did not find the need to work with their peers who were undertaking research in other fields. We will discuss how we responded to this by formulating a tool that helps doctoral students review their training needs in advance so that they can tap into the other training that is provided for them.

Levels 2-4 have been harder for us to assess, as students have been generally unwilling to interact on the eLearning site as discussed in the focus groups. We tried two approaches the first was a highly targeted and short questionnaire with multiple choice questions which we issued to 20 students who had made extensive use of the service of these two students responded. To try to overcome this we issued a second survey that asked all participants to nominate resources on the eLearning service that either helped or hindered them, giving examples of how this helped. From our preliminary results we will present their comments and reflect on this approach as a means to assess such a resource.

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