
Evaluating the Impact of Newer Researcher Training & Development: Which Direction Forward?

A Joint Seminar: Vitae & SRHE Postgraduate Issues & Academic Practice Networks

30th April 2009, University of Leeds

The seminar comprised two sessions, each with presentation followed by open discussion.

Tony Bromley, of the University of Leeds Staff & Departmental Development Unit and Convenor of Vitae's Yorkshire & North-East Hub, started the day by providing an update on the practice of evaluating impact of researcher development programmes, to include higher education staff with research roles as well as postgraduate researchers, with suggestions about how this activity will develop in the future. See accompanying file of his presentation, "Evaluating Researcher Training and Development: History, challenges, methodology and implementation":

TonyBromley30April09.ppt

His recent activity with the Vitae Rugby Team has been to lead the debate about levels of impact. The seminar served to launch Tony's new Guide in the SRHE series "Issues in Postgraduate Education: Management, Teaching and Supervision" on this topic.

The second session focused on impact in the form of participant learning and attainment (Kirkpatrick's levels 2 & 3, following the Rugby Team's framework). Robin Humphrey led with his presentation "Research Training, Researcher Development and Assessment" – see accompanying file:

RobinHumphrey30April09.ppt

He gave an account of how, as faculty Director of Postgraduate Research Training, he integrates to some extent the Roberts-funded researcher skills development provision into an interdisciplinary research training programme in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Newcastle. Modules, for instance on managing a PhD, information skills and presentation skills, are assessed in various ways.

Martin Gough, Lecturer in Higher Education & Academic Practice at the University of Kent, then complemented Robin's presentation by presenting some interim (and very provisional) findings, on the question of the appropriateness of assessment in development events which do not lead to an award, derived from the research project "Evaluation of Researcher Support Programmes: Assessment within Development Events, and the Attitudes and Experiences towards Academic Careers Provision, of



Early Career Academics (ECAs)", a joint sponsor of the seminar and funded by the Centre for Excellence in Preparing for Academic Practice. While at UCL Martin drew up the project proposal with Emma Williams (Cambridge), Frederico Matos (Cambridge & UCL), and Jon Turner (Edinburgh). Other institutions participating so far are the University of Surrey and Buckinghamshire New University, with others aiming to confirm plans soon to do likewise.

The research approach is exploratory, looking at the issue of evaluation (through learning and attainment) from a number of angles. The main research question for the fieldwork, investigating the experience of participants, is how appropriate is assessment for provision which does not lead to an award? Ideally, the project (still open to further participation) would test the comparative reaction of participants on provision without assessment and then, as an intervention, a repeat of the provision with the addition of assessment.

To date, development event participants interviewed include postgraduate teaching assistants (on teacher development programmes not essentially part of an award-bearing programme), postgraduates on a research writing workshop, ECAs on a research abstract writing workshop, and ECAs researching into higher education through a workshop on presenting (21 October 2008, a joint event between the SRHE Postgraduate Issues and Newer Researchers Networks).

Views on assessment amongst the individuals within these groups are varied. No-one actually said, "I give up my valuable time to attend your workshop... and you want me to do an assignment as well?!" although this view was acknowledged. With any discrete written tasks, someone has to spend time doing the assessing too.

Participating is seen by some in certain contexts as valuable in its own right for learning, without the need to be assessed, even by those on the teacher development programmes. Where assessment is important, the concern of this group was that the practice of teaching is judged, some assignments being seen as too abstractly theoretical. Likewise, one view expressed was that there would be little point in conducting a written essay-like task on time management as part of developing that skill area.

Otherwise, those on workshops not normally complemented by an assignment task were largely open to the addition of being assessed, even beyond the "implicit assessment syndrome" comprising (valued) qualitative feedback, including from peers, within bounded development events. Assessment should be **for** learning... as well as **of** learning (where the latter is required for provision leading to an award).

There was a strong view that there would be little point in generically assessing the written output from a research writing workshop, given that the researcher's supervisor has that role on an ongoing basis. Basic skills in written English can benefit from such attention but that would constitute different support. But the abstract writing workshop deploys workable and productive criteria for judging attainment in this more specific context. Only a small minority summoned the effort to conduct a post-workshop assignment task for this but the newer researchers presentation workshop participants engaged in their subsequent written task with some relish.

Provision leading to an award would require a gradation, at the minimum a distinction between pass and fail. Outside that context the question is whether such a dividing line



is useful. There was plenty of support for this nonetheless from some but from others also a stance that this would be insensitive to those voluntarily submitting themselves to the activity for the love of knowledge and learning, the 'romantic' narrative.

This most recent seminar on 30th April feeds into the project. The open discussion sections are audio-recorded, in order to help move further the debate in this domain of practice about 'Which Direction Forward?', with a view towards implications for both academic and non-academic career paths for researchers. Contributions from the expert discussants will be incorporated into a report of the seminar, which will serve to inform the ongoing research.

To complement the summary of this, there are some questions which participants are responding to in writing, and others interested may articulate their own responses too. I shall treat responses in confidence, if you email them to me:
A.M.Gough@kent.ac.uk

Many thanks in advance,
Martin Gough

Questions to consider for your views on assessment:

- To what extent would the addition of assignment work linked to but outside workshop events across skills and competence development programmes for researchers and early career academics enhance the learning "experience" for participants?
- Which skill areas/attributes would be enhanceable, which not?
- Would being assessed help you to understand the attainment level participants are at?
- Or would it help them learn, attain a higher standard?
- When is it important to have in assessment an indication of being "good enough", or not, i.e. pass or fail? - is it just appropriate for courses which contribute credits towards a qualification?