

# **Report of a Joint Seminar: Evaluating the Impact of Newer Researcher Training & Development: Which Direction Forward?**

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## **Summary**

*The Vitae Yorkshire & North-East Region Hub and the Society for Research into Higher Education Postgraduate Issues & Academic Practice Networks jointly organised this seminar on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2009 at the University of Leeds, UK. The seminar comprised two sessions, each with presentation followed by audio-recorded open discussion.*

*Attendees were from those working in the UK in the area of researcher and academic development who were invited and able to attend. A summary of the presentations and the second session discussion questions were posted immediately after the event on the Society for Research into Higher Education Postgraduate Issues Network website (<http://www.srhe.ac.uk/networks.pin.asp>). Those invited (attending or not) were able to respond further in writing. This report provides a collated summary of what people said in the period leading up to the Vitae researcher development conference 2009:*

*Realising the potential of researchers (8-9 September), where I introduced this report in the fringe session "Assessment within development events as evaluation of researcher support programmes", and does not draw firm conclusions. Its purpose is more 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, and to raise further discussion (see invitation at the end).*

## **"Evaluating Researcher Training and Development: History, challenges, methodology and implementation":**

Tony Bromley, of the University of Leeds Staff & Departmental Development Unit and Convenor of Vitae's Yorkshire & North-East Hub, was venue host. His recent activity with the Vitae Rugby Team has been to lead the debate about levels of impact with reports, such as the latest "Rugby Team Impact Framework: One year on" (September 2009):<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rugbyteam> The seminar served to launch Tony's new publication on this topic: *Evaluating Training and Development Programmes for Postgraduate and Newer Researchers* (Ed.: Martin Gough, series 2 no.7 in the SRHE series of Guides, "Issues in Postgraduate Education: Management, Teaching and Supervision", London: SRHE, 2009 - more details @<http://www.srhe.ac.uk/publications.gpi.asp> ).

Tony led the first session 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 the accompanying file (TonyBromley30April09.pdf, posted on the same SRHE website page) of his presentation, "Evaluating Researcher Training and Development: History, challenges, methodology and implementation". He organised discussion in smaller groups initially with the questions:

- What do you think about the approach described?

- How could the evaluation methodology be enhanced?
- How could the implementation nationally be enhanced?
- In your view are there any significant gaps in how the researcher training and development agenda is supporting the needs of its stakeholders?
- Are there any gaps in how the agenda or its evaluation supports the development of academic practice and the next generation of academics?

Discussants found the evaluation framework 'helpful and encouraging'. Levels of impact are made clear, their nuances intuitive, with development activities mapping on neatly to them. They are more sophisticated, especially as regards longer term impact, than many evaluation frameworks in use for learning and teaching in higher education.

Further questions and problems, as well as suggestions, arose:

- What about those not attending development events, or leaving early? – investigating these would make for a good study;
- there are difficulties getting feedback, especially after the event through e.g. focus groups - but people here have done this;
- there is uneven adoption of evaluation, lack of consistency of approach, across both the institution and the sector;
- What is success as regards impact?
  - employability yes (the explicit concern of government and research council)... but also mental health, work/life balance, managing stress? – the affective domain figures strongly in researchers' concerns (c.f. the Vitae "postcard to yourself");
  - there is need for a mixed research approach, longitudinal, ethnographic, phenomenographic, case studies – important for enriching the knowledge base (controlled experiments not appropriate)
  - how do we get access to the data, with different collations across different institutions, different across depts, and how do we track individuals after leaving the institution – employer views are useful (c.f. Vitae's What Do PhDs Do? investigations) but could enlisting the professional bodies more rigorously be of more use?
  - Switzerland keeps data (40 year old longitudinal dataset) on career destinations of RDP graduates, UK research councils are just starting to do this!

Tony posed a further discussion question:

- What are the key pieces of evidence that would contribute to confirming the sustainability of the agenda in the minds of the various stakeholders? and, in light of that, what are the priorities and direction that evaluation should be taking?

There was a suggestion from the discussants that we need to take such a question in the context of the prevailing Government economic and social agenda – the concern now is to get the country out of recession and people back into employment, can the Roberts agenda support this? It is quite clear that this is the current priority for underpinning the provision of Roberts money - in future years the priority might change, however? That said, however, the institution's concerns are inevitably more various,

with less concern with employability at the level of the individual institution (although the sector should be concerned about it). Priorities are:

- dissertation submission and completion rates – does the skills training provision enhance this?
- keeping and nurturing the best researchers (stemming the brain drain);
- generating research income for institutions, grant awards but also REF returns subsequently;
- PRES & CROS survey results may be a criterion for government funding in future.
- as providers we need to find our role, i.e. see that value for money is provided – e.g. pay-off for time out of research for researchers (other stakeholders would have their own criteria).

### **“Research Training, Researcher Development and Assessment”:**

The second session focused on impact in the form of participant learning and attainment (Kirkpatrick's levels 2 & 3, following the Rugby Team Impact Framework). Robin Humphrey led with his presentation “Research Training, Researcher Development and Assessment” – see accompanying file (RobinHumphrey30April09.pdf, posted on the abovementioned SRHE website page). Robin 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 introducing some interim (and very provisional) findings 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:

<http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/cetl.php?page=54>

While at UCL Martin drew up the project proposal with Emma Williams (Cambridge), Frederico Matos (Cambridge & UCL), and Jon Turner (Edinburgh):

<http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/academic-practice/support-for-teaching/externally-funded-projects.html>

Impact in the form of participant learning and attainment, knowing more of the right things and being able to conduct more of the right sorts of practice better, constitutes a robust measure of the usefulness to participants and development provision leaders. 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 investigation of the experience of participants, conducted through open-ended individual interviews and questionnaires and focus group discussions with development event participant groups, is how appropriate is assessment for provision which does not lead to an award? Assessment of activities and assignments engaged in by participants is a means for development providers to gauge learning and attainment, how well participants have done or how much they improve. Other institutions participating to date in this fieldwork are the University of Surrey and Buckinghamshire New University, with others aiming to confirm plans soon to do likewise (expressions of interest still welcome - see invitation at the end). Ideally, the project would test the comparative reaction of participants initially 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 engaged through workshops on presenting (21 October 2008 & 2 June 2009, joint events between the SRHE Postgraduate Issues and Newer Researchers Networks).

Views on assessment amongst the individuals within these groups are varied. No-one actually said (although they did acknowledge the coherence of the stance), "I give up my valuable time to attend this workshop... and they want me to do an assignment as well?!!" The project has also analysed comparatively the PRES and CROS surveys of research students and staff, and found the common perception to be that development is 'done to them' (by and presumably for management) rather than by them and for them.

Participating is, nonetheless, at least as seen by some ECAs in certain contexts as valuable in its own right for learning. In other words, these activities are perceived to be valuable regardless of whether or not they are assessed, even by those on the teacher development programmes, which are normally structured to assess attainment as a necessary condition of leading to an award. Where assessment is seen as important, the concern of this group is that the practice of teaching should be judged, perhaps in place of some of the more abstractly theoretical existing assignments. Likewise, one view expressed within this group is that there would be little point in conducting a written essay-like task on 'time management' as part of developing that skill area (of the Research Councils framework). Academic developers and academics should also bear in mind that, with any discrete written tasks, someone has to spend time doing the assessing! Otherwise, participants at development events which are not normally complemented by an assignment task are largely open to rather than cynical about being assessed.

Open fields analysis of CROS is also consistent with the claim that some research staff are looking for a richer, deeper learning experience, if they are to be engaged properly at all in development provision, and assessment could be a means to precipitate that. There is certainly support amongst interviewees for celebrating more explicitly what is largely, where it currently happens, an 'implicit assessment syndrome', comprising qualitative formative feedback, including from peers, within bounded development events. This would be a prime illustration of assessment that is for learning, facilitating the learning happening (and constructively so, not just through the stick of the fear of failure!), as opposed to assessment of learning, determining the level attained, where the latter would be required in graded form where provision also leads to an award. But it is not just a bit of on-the-spot reassurance which interests ECAs....

There is a strong view amongst interviewees that there would be little point in generically assessing the written output from a research writing workshop, given that the researcher's supervisor or mentor has that role on an ongoing basis. Basic skills in written English can benefit from such attention but that would constitute a purpose for support distinct from that which is important for researcher development. By contrast, the abstract writing workshop deploys workable and productive criteria for judging attainment in this more specific writing context. Only a small minority summoned the effort voluntarily to conduct a post-workshop assignment task for this event, with just extra practice and feedback on offer if they did. Nonetheless, the participants in the newer researchers presentation workshop engaged in their subsequent written task with some relish.

Provision leading to an award would require a gradation in assessment of assignment work, at the minimum a distinction between pass and fail. Outside the context of an

award the question is whether such a dividing line is useful. There is plenty of support for this nonetheless from some, not just a summative assessment but useful to know formatively. But from others there is also a stance that this would be insensitive, embodied in what we might classify as the 'romantic' narrative emerging from the project conversations. This comes through most strongly with some of the presentation workshop participants. Having plucked up the courage to put themselves and their own intellectual hard work on the line in front of a learned audience, for whom their presentation is a sort of gift, then to be marked down on grounds of being too fidgety or having too much text on the powerpoint slides is almost offensive (of course, all presenters need to realise that an audience is at least as much the giver, of their time and attention!). The 'romantic' view, in sum, is that the ECAs, as full or apprentice professionals, are, or ought to be, voluntarily submitting themselves to the activity for the love of knowledge and learning, not to be then reduced to one of the two crude categories of 'good enough' or 'failure'.

Following the presentations, we invited the attendees, using their experience as academic and researcher development workers, to discuss openly their reactions to the interim findings from the project's enquiry into the views of development event participants to date. The discussion on the day, along with subsequent responses in writing, based (and ordered below) around articulated questions, feeds into the project in turn.

Q1. 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?

- Assignment work can be productive if it is highly relevant to the participants and they can see a clear benefit (assessment for learning rather than merely of learning). In my own professional practice I would not describe follow up activities as assignments; rather I talk about such activities as suggestions for consolidating and enhancing learning. I ensure that activities are focussed on generating rewards of themselves (rather than focussing on contribution toward an award). For example, a post writing workshop activity, if completed by a certain date, will receive the "prize" of some copy-editing or other feedback; a grant writing workshop may be linked with applications to internal seed funding; a career workshop linked to producing an application to join a mentoring scheme.

- In general terms, the issue of assessing researcher skills is finely balanced. On the one hand, assessing can provide good feedback to the participants to help with future development, and can help guide people delivering skills sessions and events in their future planning, but on the other hand researchers can have many demands on their time and more research is needed, no doubt, into whether assessing them on these skills contributes to the quality of their research, their future employability and/or their 'student/staff experience'. Optional assessments would seem ideal - if there is resource enough to assess and feed back productively, that is!

- The main issue that will always arise here is the time taken, or rather extra time if the main body of the study required to produce the assignment articles is anyway linked with the PhD. It may be then a consequence of not writing much more than the student would have to do for a conference paper, which in any case is good to have a "trial" for. The key element in this case is to provide an opportunity directly to apply the skills they are trying to acquire to their research, which in many cases is possible but in others not.

- These would have the effect of reinforcing the material covered in the workshop, particularly if they could be designed to provide a link between the training and workplace environments.
- Assignments and assessment have to be practice-based – e.g. if they are about teaching then through teaching observation/mentoring and feedback.
- Formal assessment in a postdoc training course is likely to put off postdocs from attending the course. Workshops that lead to work-based learning opportunities are a better assessment of learning skills over time.

Q1a. Which skill areas/attributes would be enhanceable by assignment work, which not?

- Are dissertation submission and completion rates a measure of the researcher's time management capacity? – certainly a crude measure if they are, a question whether they are even an objective measure for this capacity – there is a common feeling that we are looking for something else as more appropriate measure of competence here.
- This is almost an ontologically focused question! With careful design all areas are enhanceable.
- Most skill areas/attributes are enhanceable, but these areas are all linked to participants' (legitimate and peripheral) participation within academic communities, and it is managing this experience that is key.
- From a careers point of view it would be useful to get researchers to hand in a draft CV or application form for specific comments by development staff.
- Application skills such as CV and application form writing, performance at mock interviews and mock assessment centres would be enhanced. Self-reflection skills would not be enhanced by assessment.
- Presentation skills, writing skills, data presentation, networking, time management, CV writing, interview skills, etc. are all cases where the PhD student has an opportunity to apply such skills during their research programme. Furthermore they can actively reflect on their development of such skills in consultation with their supervisor, although both parties need to acknowledge the need to fulfil this role. Other skills, on the other hand, will not be directly identifiable in a research degree programme in terms of applying such as interpersonal skills, negotiation, leadership, team working skills that their research degree programme will not directly utilise. Having said that there may be responsibilities that they have in their time as a student where they do need to apply such skills through extra curricular activity, management of departmental facilities (e.g. using a laboratory), teaching duties, contract work, supervising of taught students. In all these cases they are not undertaking work directly related to their doctorate though they still have to take such responsibilities and will gain attainable skills that they can indicate on their CV so there is a need to look at the life of a PhD student globally, not just the work they are doing towards a PhD thesis.
- This would probably be most appropriate for skills and attributes which can be developed on a relatively short term basis. It would also be easier to enhance those which were relevant to particular events which happened to be taking place at the "right" time, e.g. for research students production of the six monthly report on progress.

- Formal assessed tasks will be superfluous for generic skills, even if individual level attainment is important – e.g. time management, presentation skills - poster competitions and feedback on presentation is assessment even if not labelled as such, just there would not be a formally assessed task afterwards.

Q2. Would participants being assessed help you to understand the attainment level participants are at?

- It is possible roughly to gauge progress and notice learning just through engagement contained within one course which often has informal on-course assessment

- Yes, e.g. quality of CV or mock interview would demonstrate how well they are prepared for the real job market.

- Yes, this would also give useful additional feedback in order to guide the development of subsequent events.

- This is an “as long as a piece of string” question. In general yes, I use the information gained from activities to aid my understanding as well as the understandings of the participants.

- How well research students do on the training programme is a strong indicator of how well their doctoral research is progressing.

- Is needs analysis and monitoring progress against needs of PhD candidates, involving supervisors, assessment? – is this sufficient, no need for further assessed assignments? – is ultimately attaining the PhD to imply competence under skills headings, otherwise they would not complete it? - supervisors getting involved more is generally better, need to strengthen supervisor practice rather than supplant it – although independent (from supervisor) progress monitoring is important for appropriate judgements – we need to be aware of disciplinary differences here, however.

- Yes and no. Attaining a mark in a skills course or subject area may show that a quality has been attained, while at the same time it may only depend on the fact that the examination or coursework concerned was a success. On the other hand knowledge may not have been gained that can be applied. This could only be attained through identification of development through PDP, mentoring, etc., where a supervisor has an important role in identifying such development. For research degree where a student is learning by doing, rather than by listening and understanding, assessment is not the key indicator.

- Does having to evidence progress constitute a better language than having to be assessed? – e.g. a real presentation to a real conference, ask how well gone as an appropriate measure?

- The evaluation of the course or programme for impact is the priority, do we need to gauge formally accurately individual progress as well?

Q2a. Or would being assessed help them learn, attain a higher standard?

- Probably so on both counts.

- Many do get motivated by assessment tasks (e.g. on training programmes for new lecturers), will achieve more as a result.

- Completing a CV for written feedback would be a valuable test of the learning in this session and allow further learning when individual feedback is given. Mock interviews are in effect an assessment of learning from the interview techniques workshop, with researchers getting in-depth one-to-one feedback on their performance. Mock assessment centres allow researchers to practice presentation and group work skills in a safe environment and then get one-to-one feedback.

- Possibly it would warn a student where they are not meeting the necessary standard, since this can be allied with an MPhil/PhD transfer. If a student is not successful with their transfer, it provides them with a clear warning to tighten their belt and complete their PhD more successfully. Assessment could therefore also provide this impetus to perform.

- It rather depends on the quality of the assessment activities. I am concerned that assessment is included for sound educational reasons rather than to enhance the profile of a programme.

Q3. When is it important to have in assessment an indication of being "good enough", or not, i.e. pass or fail?

- Most importantly to identify when a student is not making significant effort and as such I am more of a supporter of a "pass/fail" rather than a more nuanced grading in research degree programmes as a whole. It would then be easy enough to distinguish those who are failing to identify and fulfil their training needs.

- Particularly when being "good enough" gives a particular status or label, e.g. completing our research supervisor course is part of moving from being an associate to an approved supervisor.

- Quality is always important. Yet, I am wary of the simplicity of pass/fail ... I think as educators we need to be more savvy than that!

- I would not see it in those terms but rather a matter of giving constructive feedback and highlighting strengths and development areas.

- It has to be formative rather than summative, the 'good enough' model is important where this means accrediting e.g. teaching portfolios through formative commentaries, and a couple of feedback iterations.

Q3a. Is this pass/fail distinction just appropriate for courses which contribute credits towards a qualification?

Q3b. How can generic skills be assessed if not part of a wider/cohesive programme?

- For those who are assessed, there would ideally be recognition with some form of transferable, nationally/internationally recognised certification.

- Certificates are valued in themselves, especially by international researchers.

- An award bearing programme is what gives assessment purposiveness in a cohesive structure.



- Space is needed for the PDP/mentoring to take place and as such the training needs to facilitate this alongside but also distinct from working to the necessary credits.
- No. Gaining credit for a module can be controversial in some areas, whereas this type of voluntary assessment would be less so. Peer assessment techniques can be used. More controversial might be to ask those on the receiving end, i.e. research staff to assess PIs and research students to assess supervisors.
- No, as none of my courses are accredited towards their qualification. Feedback on communication, team working, etc. are often a big part of sessions which are primarily there to develop career planning skills, and feedback would be given on these as part of the activities.
- The need is to design activities to generate rewards of themselves, rather than focussing on contribution toward an award. The link to a wider programme will vary according to the purpose of the assessment and the purposes of the audience for any outputs.
- The answers to these discussion questions are more likely to be constrained by institutional agendas rather than pedagogic concerns.

By way of tentative conclusion:

Overall, there should be no surprise that people working in this domain hold differing views, whether determined by particular circumstances and contexts or otherwise, and I do not see it as appropriate to gloss over the differences to achieve a common position. Yet perhaps we can see that it is important that the tail of summative assessment, where that is defined according to the needs of accredited and award-bearing provision, does not wag the dog of learning through committed purposive participation. At the same time, there is a strong indication that the selective integration of tasks into development provision, as means by which the performance and competence of participants may be assessed, would constitute a fruitful investment of resources. I invite further anyone involved in researcher and academic development who is interested in trying out assessment in their provision, or who is interested to find out what their participants' views are on learning and attainment in this context as data for the project, to get in touch as soon as convenient. The project ends in March 2010.

Anyone interested may articulate their own responses in writing too to the seminar discussion questions (listed again below). I shall treat responses in confidence, if you email them to me: [A.M.Gough@kent.ac.uk](mailto:A.M.Gough@kent.ac.uk)

Questions to consider for your views on assessment:

Q1. 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?

Q1a. Which skill areas/attributes would be enhanceable, which not?

Q2. Would participants being assessed help you to understand the attainment level participants are at?

Q2a. Or would being assessed help them learn, attain a higher standard?

Q3. When is it important to have in assessment an indication of being “good enough”, or not, i.e. pass or fail?

Q3a. Is this just appropriate for courses which contribute credits towards a qualification?

Q3b. How can generic skills be assessed if not part of a wider/cohesive programme?