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Developing Research Capabilities Via Video-conferencing

There is a need for lecturers and administrators in Scotland's colleges to develop research skills because they can be called upon to carry out some research as part of their job. A lecturer may need to investigate ways of improving learning for a particular group of students, or may have embarked on a research degree or other postgraduate course that requires they carry out some kind of investigation. Or an administrator may need to collect and analyse information on issues and problems at individual, group or institutional level, as an aid to decision making and determining policy.

However, many college staff lack the experience and skills, and thus confidence, in conducting an investigation. They can be put off even by the thought of research. Many think that research is not for them but that it is for outside experts and professional researchers, not realising that it is something that they can do already in other circumstances based on common sense. They are not aware that they can easily gain some of the experience in strategies, methods and analytical techniques of the professional researcher by carrying out worthwhile studies that are of relevance to their job.

Furthermore despite the fact that there is a need for college staff to develop research skills, they tend not to receive formal training in research skills – even though developing such transferable, research skills will help staff to work more effectively within a college and lead to improving the quality of college education and other college services.

TRAIL

One of the aims of the 'Towards Regional, Accessible, and Inclusive Learning' (TRAIL) project implemented at UHI Millennium Institute (UHI) was to address such a gap in staff research training and development. The research and development aspect of the project set out to provide a way of assisting staff and postgraduate students across the colleges and research institutions of UHI to develop research capabilities.

The TRAIL project brought together both college staff interested and experienced in conducting research and provided them with appropriate seminars to learn and develop their research skills. Each seminar was written and presented by a UHI member of staff with research experience and expertise. The seminars were delivered weekly for one hour on Friday lunchtimes via video-conferencing across the UHI Academic Partners.

The notes and handouts for the seminars provided by the presenters formed the base of an online resource. The UHI Rough Guide to Research was developed to provide on-demand, just-in-time, online information so that UHI staff and students are able to carry out

> 'There is a need for lecturers and administrators in Scotland's colleges to develop research skills because they can be called upon to carry out some research as part of their job.'

specific research tasks and find solutions to common problems and issues in research.

The purpose of the series of video-conferencing seminars was to encourage and support both practitioners doing research and staff thinking about doing research. In particular, the seminars provided a general introduction to research skills, methods and issues for those unfamiliar with what is involved in carrying out research. The range of seminars delivered covered the whole research process from planning and writing a research proposal, through developing an appropriate methodology, selecting and implementing data collection methods, analysing the data, and to presenting the results and writing the report.

Relevant issues and research matters were also covered in the seminars, such as 'conducting a small research project while working full-time'; 'mixing methodologies: overcoming the quantitative and qualitative divide'; 'writing and publishing research articles'; 'talking to the media about your research'; and 'action research for FE lecturers'.

Also staff and postgraduate students with research experience shared their research studies and discussed their results and conclusions with others as a way of promoting good practice. For example, a Science lecturer discussed her previous research into 'aviation physiology', and a postgraduate environment student presented his research into 'climate change in the highlands and islands'.

Participant Feedback

The seminars proved to be popular with UHI staff and postgraduate students; approximately 450 people in total participated in the 42 seminars over a two-year period. In particular, we found that the seminars presented between September and December tended to attract more participants than those presented between February and June.

The main features that participants said that they liked best about the seminar programme are illustrated by the following quotes:

'Getting people together who need or can give advice.'

'The fact that it makes talking/learning about research possible.'

'Meeting others over the network and finding out what other research is going on.'

'The programme is comprehensive and the timing of the workshops is generally good for me.'

'It gives us the opportunity to attend a lecture without travelling.'

'I have found the information very useful and presented in a user friendly way. The brevity of the notes/sessions enables you to dip in quickly for info and explore in more depth if necessary.'

There was an unintentional bias towards social science and small-scale studies in the seminars as a result of the background of the presenters who volunteered to deliver one. Even though some of the topics were somewhat irrelevant to their own situations, some participants still valued connecting with others and finding out what other research was going on.

> **'The purpose was to encourage and support both practitioners doing research and staff thinking about doing research.'**

However, the seminar programme did not work well for everyone. The main aspects that participants said that they liked least about the seminar programme are illustrated by the following quotes:

'The medium of VC is still a bit stale.'

'They did not achieve active participation or discussion.'

'Trying to cover too much in one session.'

'Not enough detail.'

'Unfortunately I am not a social scientist and so a lot of the information in the lectures is not relevant to my PhD research.'

'The timing is impossible for me – I still have classes at 12:30.'

During the seminar programme steps were taken to improve the seminars in accordance with the participant feedback as far as was possible. Some of the steps were easier to implement than others. For example, we were able to stop wasting time at the start of a seminar through taking a note of the names of those present by having the names e-mailed to the co-ordinator after the session.

There was a demand for continuing activity to support staff and postgraduate students in developing their research capabilities as indicated by the suggestions that some of the participants made for research topics that they would like to be covered such as in specific subject areas including psychology, rural development, biological sciences, and education. Furthermore participants contributed suggestions on extending the research programme with face-to-face follow up meetings for local staff at each site, and recording the seminars and making them available online to access as and when possible.

Conclusion

Overall, we found that the TRAIL series of research VC seminars has demonstrated that there is a way of developing research capabilities and generating a research culture in colleges through:

- sharing staff expertise and experience
- connecting people with similar research interests at a convenient time and place.

However, all of this counts for very little if an institution does not give staff some time free from teaching and administrative duties. An appropriate time allowance will enable them to better undertake a specific piece of research that will be of relevance to their job and of benefit to the quality of college education and other college services.