

The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research

Academic Fellowship Progress Report

Project: Evaluating and Reinventing Sociology's Professional Skills Programme:
Research Skills for First Years

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I Summary

The Department of Sociology at Warwick runs a Professional Skills Programme which aims to introduce research skills for first-year undergraduates. This fellowship evaluates the existing programme and its capacity to deliver both transferable, subject-specific and intellectual research skills, and student reflexivity about research skill acquisition. Students are involved in the design and implementation of the evaluation, and generating ideas for reinventing the programme.

All the milestones and targets for the project to date have been achieved, with the main outputs so far being the dissemination and analysis of questionnaires across the first year cohort, non-participant observation of PSP seminars and the contribution of first years in selected seminars to a focus group discussion about PSP and research skills. The main conclusions of the project to date are as follows:

- PSP in its current form is used only selectively by the majority of students and only half of them associate it with transferable research skills
- Students generally want the programme to continue but with new content that facilitates more independent learning and student-generated content
- Tutors are adopting a flexible approach to the programme that students appreciate

The project is now moving into its second phase. This includes interviews with PSP seminar tutors, identification of best practice across the University and beyond, and proposals for the reinvention of PSP.

II Project Orientation

The original aims and objectives of the project are as follows:

1. to evaluate the existing Professional Skills Programme (PSP) in the Sociology department and its capacity to deliver: a) transferable, subject-specific and intellectual research skills; b) student reflexivity about research skill acquisition

2. To consider the scope for reinventing PSP to promote student-centred and student-initiated research skill acquisition
3. to involve students in the design and implementation of the evaluation and in generating ideas for reinventing the Professional Skills Programme, including renaming it.

The first phase of the project has concentrated mainly on the following sub-set of research questions, addressed via questionnaires and focus groups:

1. How effective is PSP in developing students' transferable, subject-specific and intellectual research skills?
2. What are students' perceptions of the knowledge and skills acquired through PSP?
3. What other routes do students identify as important for the acquisition and development of such skills?

The project was originally to begin in April 2007, but a subsequent request from the PI to postpone the start date to October 2007 was agreed by the Reinvention Centre. The revised dates in terms of Milestones and Targets throughout the duration of the project are as follows:

End of Autumn term, 2007	Establish Student Steering Group; complete questionnaires and focus groups with first years
End of Spring term, 2008	Complete preliminary analysis of questionnaires and focus group material
31 May 2008	Progress Report due
End of vacation 2008	Complete interviews with seminar tutors and preliminary analysis thereof; complete identification of 'best practice' within the University and the HE sector
End of Autumn term 2008	Complete focus groups with second years reflecting on PSP in their first year
31 March 2009	Complete proposals for 'reinvention' of PSP; Final Report due

III Activities to Date

October 2007

Maud Perrier, doctoral student in Sociology, was taken on as the postgraduate research assistant for the project (RA). Incoming first year undergraduates were informed of the project both through e-mail and a short presentation at the first Student-Staff Liaison Committee meeting of the Autumn term. Volunteers were then invited to sit on the Student Steering Group and an initially larger group stabilized as follows: Sana Ahmad (year 1); Suraiya Hawa (year 1); Maud Perrier (RA); Natalie Sahunta (year 1).

November 2007

The first meeting of the Steering Group took place on 13 November and lasted one hour. Initial thoughts about the project were exchanged and then the original Methodology was considered and refined. It was agreed that some closed questions should be included in the questionnaire for all first years, and that this should be distributed, completed and collected during PSP seminar time in week 9 of the Autumn term. It was also proposed by the students on the Steering Group, and agreed, that some non-participant observation of the delivery of PSP seminars should be added to the methodology, to be undertaken in the Spring term. The students felt it was important to observe PSP seminars first hand, to see how much time was spent on it and how it was managed, how prepared and enthusiastic students were, and how PSP related to the SII seminar. [Note: the PSP element comprises a notional 30 minutes of a 90 minute seminar slot, with the first hour devoted to a seminar on the first year core module SII – Sociological Imagination and Investigation].

The PI drafted the student questionnaire and circulated it to the Steering Group for comments. The finalised questionnaire was then distributed to seminar tutors for dissemination to students in the week beginning 26 November.

December 2007

The second meeting of the Steering Group took place on 4 December, again for one hour. The meeting made an initial review of the completed questionnaires and discussed how they would be analysed. It was agreed that the pre-coded questions would be entered into SPSS so basic quantitative analysis could be performed, and that the qualitative data would also be coded where practicable.

Ruth Morton, research student in Sociology, was contracted to undertake the SPSS data entry and analysis, liaising with the PI throughout.

January 2008

The third meeting of the Steering Group took place on 29 January, again for one hour. Ruth Morton was invited to the meeting to present the questionnaire analysis and to talk more broadly about quantitative vs. qualitative data and the merits of SPSS. Feedback from the students on the Steering Group was very positive in terms of having played a

part in the design, implementation and analysis of this element of the project. They also reflected on their double role, as researcher and researched, having been part of the student body that had completed the questionnaires. Recruitment to the student focus groups was also discussed and it was agreed that an announcement would be made at the end of an SII lecture.

February 2008

Permission was sought and granted from the two convenors of SII for non-participant observation of a sample of SII seminars, including those led by both sessional teachers and permanent faculty. The observations were then undertaken by the PI and by Maud Perrier, as follows, with written notes being made:

- 5 February, Maud observed Anton Popov's seminar (11.30am-1pm)
- 7 February, Caroline observed Margaret Archer's seminar (3.30pm-5pm)
- 8 February, Maud observed Dominic Pasura's seminar (10-11.30am)
- 21 February, Caroline observed Peter Ratcliffe's seminar (10.30am-12 noon)

An attempt to recruit volunteers to the student focus groups was made at the end of the SII lecture on 26 February 2008 by the PI. However the response was poor, with only 2 students and a possible third volunteering. It was then decided, in consultation with the SII convenors, that it would be possible to run the focus groups as part of the PSP seminars towards the end of term, since the programme had some flexibility built in and there was one less activity scheduled than weeks available.

March 2008

Three focus groups in week 9 and 10 were arranged. The plan was for the PI and the RA to run them together, but in the event the PI was ill and it was decided that the RA would go ahead without her as it would be very difficult to re-arrange the slots.

- 6 March, 30 minute student focus group convened by RA as part of the Peter Ratcliffe's seminar
- 7 March, 30 minute student focus group convened by RA as part of Dominic Pasura's seminar
- 11 March, 30 minute student focus group convened by RA as part of Hilary Pilkington's seminar

The RA took notes during the focus group and then wrote these up afterwards.

April-June 2008

Having completed the first phase of the project, there was little activity in this period, not least because the students were busy with revision and exams and the PI and RA with marking.

IV Preliminary Findings

The following findings are identified in relation to the three research questions at the heart of the first phase of the project. It should be emphasised that they are derived from preliminary analysis and are not definitive at this point.

Question 1: How effective is PSP in developing students' transferable, subject-specific and intellectual research skills?

- Not as effective as it could be overall – over 50% of students see large parts or all of the programme in a negative light
- More effective at developing skills in academic referencing – 37% of students rated this component the highest
- Partly effective at developing skills in academic writing – 16% of students rated this component the highest
- 87% of students consider the PSP handbook to be mostly or very clear in terms of instructions and guidance
- 60% of students consider PSP to be mostly or very relevant to their academic modules, particularly in terms of academic referencing and writing
- Student investment in PSP could be higher – no students report investing a lot of time and effort, 33% report investing some, 60% not very much and the remainder none. There is a moderately positive association between students' investment and how useful they found PSP.
- 19% of students report putting more effort in where they felt it to be beneficial, eg. academic referencing and writing

Seminar observations suggest varying levels of student investment: the percentage of students who had completed the PSP exercise in advance and brought it with them to the seminar ranged from 20% to 70%. Tutor investment also varied, the time allocated to PSP ranging between 10 minutes and 30 minutes.

Question 2: What are students' perceptions of the knowledge and skills acquired through PSP?

- 47% of students consider the knowledge and skills developed to be very or mostly transferable¹
- The overall level is too basic for many – 26% of students rated this as their least preferred aspect
- Students are largely positive towards seminar tutors, valuing their flexible and enthusiastic approach to PSP, placing greatest emphasis on those aspects that students perceived as most useful

Seminar observation illustrated flexible tutor approaches. Most tutors do PSP towards the end of the 90 minutes but one tutor does it first and, perhaps because they know it going to be the first thing on the agenda, the students seem more prepared.

Question 3: What other routes do students identify as important for the acquisition and development of such skills?

- Further education before University
- Other seminar tutors
- Personal tutor
- Their other department (for joint degree students)

Students were also asked specifically about any changes they would like to see in PSP, by way of contributing to a further project research question: How could PSP be redesigned to promote students' investments in it and ownership of it?

77% of students who completed this part of the questionnaire wanted some form of change to the programme. There was greatest support for making it optional, 55% of students in favour, although 38% disagreed and the later focus group discussions generally discounted this. 30% supported making it credit-bearing but 64% were opposed to this, and 31% supported separating the delivery from SII, with 62% opposed.

The focus group discussion elicited a wide range of views, but the following recurring themes can be identified:

- The programme workbook is invaluable as a point of reference and should continue to be provided even if the seminar changes

¹ However, qualitative responses indicate that transferability was not always well understood or understood only narrowly in terms of transferability to other undergraduate modules.

- A physical workbook was much preferred over an online only version
- Detaching the seminar from SII would have a negative impact on access to the programme and student attendance
- The programme works best when the content and activities relate directly to SII
- Although PSP activities might be concentrated into term 1, it is important to retain the 30 minute slot throughout the year because it creates a space for students to ask questions about research skills and enables SII discussion to expand if necessary
- Tutors should continue to adopt a flexible approach to PSP, using their judgment to concentrate on 'core skills' as they saw fit / in accordance with seminar group's needs and preferences

V Phase 2

The project now moves to the next phase. Interviews with seminar tutors will seek to capture their insights into PSP and its reinvention, as well as allowing for triangulation with the data from students. Tutors will be provided with a copy of the student questionnaire analysis in advance. Identification of best practice across the University, in other Sociology departments around the UK and across the sector will also inform reinvention. The work fostered by the CETL at Reading (Centre for Excellence in Applied Undergraduate Research Skills) will be of particular interest in this respect. There will be at least one further meeting of the Student Steering Group in the next academic year, to get their input into the ongoing methodology and to share tutor perspectives and best practice.

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