

Keeping the 'kill' out of Skills with Creative Thinking !

(Vitae SWW Hub – Annual Good Practice Conference, Wales Millennium Centre, Feb'10)

In these workshops a brief introduction was given to Creative Problem Solving, Creative Conversations and 'Open-Space' meetings. Some of the techniques described were then practised by working with the following challenge:

What are the issues, challenges and opportunities for PG skills training in HE, and the people involved in skills training beyond the currently guaranteed funding period (Mid to late 2011) ?

Though there were two separate one-hour workshops the outcomes have been combined below. Please note in the time available it was not possible to develop the 'Open-Space' discussions very far. Here the discussions lasted only about fifteen minutes compared with the typical time of up to an hour in an 'Open Space' meeting after sub-themes have been identified.

Many thanks are due to all the conference attendees who attended these sessions and put forward all of the contributions recorded below.

The outcomes of paired creative conversations on the over-arching theme above resulted in the following 20 sub-themes for 'Open-Space' discussions.

Sub-themes emerging from paired 'creative' conversations:

1. How can the requirements of the Research Councils be met without funding ?
2. How can we fund transferable skills training – post Robert's ?
3. Who takes responsibility for training ?
4. Can supervisors be expected to pick up the slack for generic skills training ?
5. How can personal and professional development needs be met without funding ?
6. What if the research skills training was devolved to School level ?
7. How does one embed skills training ?
8. Could Schools support specific training ?
9. What about a University top-up for generic skills training ?
10. Is skills training value for money ?
11. How do you ensure quality if the funding disappears ?
12. Is evaluation important ?
13. Could we use internal experts to deliver workshops eg Ph.Ds ?
14. Are Universities doing enough to engage their researchers with employers ?
15. Should we collaborate more ?
16. How do we increase employers' understanding ?
17. How do we put aside our own insecurity in order to focus on the bigger picture ?
18. How do we ensure continued high quality provision when costs need to be cut ?
19. How do we keep skills training high on the agenda ?
20. How do we embed skills training in to the core of the organisations' objectives and vision ?

Owing to time limitations only two or three parallel 'Open-Space' discussions could take place. These were selected by inviting the participants to vote for the top two

conversations from the list that interested them most. The most popular themes were then selected and discussions held with the aim of recording the issues that emerged from these sub-themes and any ideas and solutions that might address the sub-theme or its associated issues.

The information collected on flip-charts from each discussion is listed below.

Please note these sessions only gave a taste of 'Open-Space' so many of the discussions had not developed very far. Added brackets in the outcomes are my own best guess for clarity.

The 'Open-Space' Discussions:

Sub-theme: 1. How can the requirements of the Research Councils be met without funding ?

Issues/Challenges:

Research Council students are currently treated the same as self-funded students.
How much does it really cost ?
Supervisors should be involved but are not - they do specific.....
Companies offer their own very good skills training!
(What about) supervisor skills for research training ?

Ideas/Solutions:

Online training portal - HEI
- Vitae for the whole UK

Research Council students get better training
Work with the PIs to include funding in their proposals for transferable skills training (esp joint Industry awards)
Research Council students deliver the training themselves !
Change training guidelines !
Offer skills training to employers on a commercial basis
Make students pay more
Funding by Alumni ?
Include in the Research Excellence Framework.

Sub-theme 6: What if the research skills training was devolved to School level ?

Issues/Challenges:

It happens already ! Resources issues. Tension with the core programme.
Quality. Critical mass. Risk of repetition. 'Academise' skills.

Ideas/Solutions:

Core programme funding issues ? Training the trainer (academic).
(Have a) named coordinator at School level.

Sub-theme 4: Can supervisors be expected to pick up the slack for generic skills training ?

Issues/Challenges:

One person can not be expected to know everything.
Can expect certain competence if one has got to be a supervisor.
Would need a whole new level of training then for supervisors.
Some supervisors have no university training.
(They)can share specialist knowledge.
Centralised to de-centralised model – Where does the money come from ?

Ideas/Solutions:

Put it in their contract !
Can the larger Robert's funded universities learn from how the smaller institutions work that don't have this funding ?

Sub-Theme 15: Should we collaborate more ?

Issues/Challenges:

Strength in numbers ?
Research Councils/Funding bodies like this (idea of collaboration).
Sharing Ideas/Learning from others with more experience/pooling expertise.
Economics of scale ! Unwieldy – (There would be) decision-making delays.
External trainers versus 'Home' (In-house).
Robert's – Transferable Skills
- Employability

Ideas/Solutions:

University of Bath idea – training research staff to facilitate the skills training

Sub-Theme 11: How do we ensure quality if the funding disappears ?

Issues/Challenges:

Do you think quality of skills training is worse in the institutions without Robert's funding ?
Whether it happens or not – will we be able to bring in externals ?
How far down the list of priorities will this be ?
How does the training affect their employability ?
How important is Vitae ?

Ideas/Solutions:

Keep the funding for Vitae or a similar driver !
Should be on VC & PVC agendas. Concentrate on what works well !

Thanks again to Anne Goodman, Hub Manager, Vitae SWW Hub for organising this event and to all participants who contributed to these workshops.

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