Developing research capabilities in FE lecturers through practitioner led action research

## FINAL REPORT

# Introduction

The main aim of this project was to help develop research skills in Further Education lecturers who are involved in both Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) delivery. Recent developments in FE have recognised the need to develop research capacity within FE institutions and a number of networks have responded. One such network is the UHI Millennium Institute (UHI) which includes 14 FE colleges and two research establishments. Another Scottish network is the FE Regional Research Network (FERRN) for Fife and the Lothians. The importance of research is well embedded in both these networks but there is still a need for research capacity building. Cunningham and Doncaster (2002) examined the possibility of linking staff development with research capacity building and suggested this as a way for a college to develop its research strategy in line with the government’s agenda. Other research exploring the development of research capacity in an FE setting identifies and constructs a new theoretical framework for a specialist FE research culture. Hillier & Jameson (2003) also highlight the important effect of research practices on individual lecturer’s teaching and learning

Many staff within the colleges that form UHI now teach at both FE and HE level and are increasingly expected to engage with research. However, currently there are limited links between the more traditional research establishments and staff in the colleges. Traditionally, however, college staff have not engaged in research and have therefore not necessarily developed the required skills.

This project’s aim was to support the development of basic research skills for such staff through the planning and execution of a small-scale project that related to one aspect of the individual’s teaching practice. Action research was chosen as a methodology since it is by definition small scale and rooted in practice. There is a strong tradition of action research in school based education (see for example Stenhouse, 1975) in which teaching and research are understood as inextricably linked. Other writers on action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982 & 1992 however, stress the systematic nature of the research and the need for research skills which go beyond those of the teacher. In a study 56 action research projects in the UK Open University Coats and Stevenson (2004) note how small scale action research can be a powerful driver for academic development in learning and teaching.

It was intended that the research project would fit into the day-to-day teaching of the participants in such a way that it would not require extensive changes to current practice. However, participants were expected to engage with some relevant literature, gather some data and use this as a basis for an investigation of their own practice. This was to take place during the second semester of the session 2004-2005, and if necessary into 2005-06. It was anticipated that the projects would all be quite different; some including piloting materials during the second semester with the main data gathering during the next semester, others forming part of year long investigation of the impact of the curriculum on a particular type of student. The project was mainly aimed at UHI staff; however, to encourage the development of a network of researchers beyond UHI, staff from another higher education institution were also invited to participate.

It also aimed to encourage the development of a community of researching practitioners by establishing a mainly online discussion group to support practitioners loosely based on Wenger’s ideas on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). This community would be developed by using both face to face and distance means of communicating. The project was about developing research and collaborative skills whilst also developing a greater understanding of teaching and learning. It was hoped that it would therefore encourage reflection on teaching and learning and potentially impact on future delivery.

The objectives were to:

* develop research capacity in FE staff engaged in FE and/or HE teaching;
* make use of small scale action research projects to contextualise this development within the staff’s own professional practice;
* engage with aspects of learning and teaching as part of the process of capacity building;
* encourage the ability of staff to disseminate their findings through publication of their findings in academic journals and/or to present at conferences.

The expected outcomes or deliverables from the project were:

1. A set of activities that can be used within a range of settings to develop research capability;
2. A plan for a workshop that can be adapted to a range of different settings;
3. A set of ‘mini-projects’ that can be used within a range of settings where practitioners wish to undertake a small scale enquiry into their own teaching.

As well as seeking funding for the project from Escalate the UHI staff development officer was informed of the project and offered support. There was no monetary support simply support which included encouraging staff participation in the project as this fitted with the UHI’s mission of growing an HE and research culture from the prevailing FE outlook. The work began in February 2005 and this consisted of a mailing to all UHI staff inviting them to participate in the project. The funding bid included a small payment (£250) for staff who participated and produced a report or responded to evaluation if they were unable to complete. This recognised that being able to identify the reasons why staff were unable to complete would be just as relevant to the project as those that had fully participated; something that has proved to be the case. The small cohort of participants was linked directly to the size of the ESCalate grant and what we were able to do within the limits of money and practicality.

It was recognised (and the reason for bidding for the ESCalate funding) that staff would require support throughout the project. The project therefore included an initial workshop with preparatory work, ongoing one-to-one mentoring (at a distance), access to a discussion board with a number of focused topics sessions, a video-conferencing meeting and a final workshop. The participants were also provided with guidance on how to prepare their report and their evaluation of the research skills developed.

The projects were to be completed by the end of March 2006 with an interim report to ESCalate by the end of August 2006 and the final report submitted by end November 2006. The materials used for the workshops and the format of the support provided for those participating in the study were also be provided.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Six members of staff responded to the initial call to participate. All of the volunteers were new to action research. One of these, a male member of staff in one of the largest UHI colleges, withdrew prior to the first meeting. He cited pressure of work as his reason for not participating. The remaining five were all female. Participant 1, 2 and 3 come from small island colleges but not the same colleges; Participant 4 is a non-UHI participant who works in a small, city-based higher education institution; and Participant 5 comes from a large UHI college. Participant 5 came from the same institution as the person who withdrew from the project after initially indicating willingness to participate. We are referring to the participants by number to ensure anonymity.

The four UHI members of staff were all full-time lecturers and the participant from the other HEI is Head of Student Services, a unit which provides careers, jobshop, student finance advice, pre-entry/mature student guidance, student mentoring and community liaison.

The core team of the project initially consisted of two people who put together the initial bid. They were joined by two colleagues from another institution (HEI) and by a further two UHI members of staff. One of the UHI members of staff did not have time to continue working with the project, the other did stay as a mentor and attended the first workshop.

The project/mentor team consisted of the following people:

1. The project leader who is Education Subject Network leader for UHI, course leader for a UHI Master programme in Professional Development and an experienced staff developer;
2. The co-project leader, an experienced social scientist and researcher, formerly a lecturer/researcher at a UHI partner college and now at the University of Edinburgh as a full-time researcher;
3. The head of school at a UHI partner college with extensive experience in the secondary and FE sectors;
4. The Director of the Centre for Academic Practice at Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh with responsibility for academic staff development in both learning, teaching and research capability;
5. The Depute Director of the Open University in Scotland with responsibility for Learning and Teaching who was a staff development officer at an HEI at the time of joining the project.

The team therefore represented a substantial body of experience from a wide range of educational sectors, straddling secondary, FE and HE.

**Meetings: face to face and virtual**

Workshop 1

For participants workshop 1 consisted of two phases:

* Pre-workshop preparation;
* Participation in workshop activities.

In order to prepare for the workshop all those that had agreed to participate in the project were asked to fill in a proforma which encouraged them to note down some initial ideas about a research study that they would like to undertake as part of the ESCalate project. The participants were provided with some initial feedback on their ideas prior coming to the workshop. This was done through email.

The workshop consisted of an input from two of the facilitators about action research and this allowed for a general discussion about issues in relation to carrying out research. The participants were then allocated to mentors and each pair (mentor/participant) discussed the particular research project that the participant had indicated that they wanted to undertake. The mentor acted as a ‘critical friend’ and probed in order to test the feasibility of that particular project.

Participants were asked to give us feedback on the workshop through a Discussion Board set up on the dedicated (password protected) Blackboard website. The feedback was not anonymised as the number of participants was small and it would be difficult to ensure total anonymity. The three participants that did provide feedback were positive about the experience:

(Participant 1) *The workshop was excellent and a great opportunity to get to know others involved in the project. It was useful as well in sorting out ideas with input from other people to get something straight in my head.*

She added further comments on this initial workshop in her interview towards the end of the project:

*The meeting in Inverness helped me think about what I wanted to do and start to formulate my questions. It was a great opportunity to talk to people, discuss ideas; others gave me ideas, prompted thinking, made suggestions. ‘Why not do something you need to do?’ one person said.*

This participant also hinted at the difficulties that all of the participants have faced in taking part in a project of this nature – the problem of time:

Participant 2: *Life has been a bit hectic since, though and I seem to have lost some of it. But now that I have seen my visitors off on the ferry I can start thinking it through and see what I have left of the certainties that I did have.*

Participant 3 did not get round to posting on the noticeboard but did respond to an email from her mentor:

Participant 3: *Hi! Yes I found Sat very motivating* *and I am now feeling even more enthusiastic about my school leavers’ issues!*

The workshop participants were highly motivated and came to the event with ideas about the areas of practice that they wished to research. The workshop helped to answer important practical questions about getting started on a research project; for example, how and where to locate relevant literature. The format allowed everyone to contribute ideas and experience and learn from each other about search techniques.

The open format of the workshop also helped participants to clarify their understanding of action research. A participant noted that

*‘I liked the discussion of other people’s thoughts on their research subjects and the methods that they were intending to use for their research questions.’*

One individual had looked at critiques of action research and there was a discussion about the role of the researcher. However, the key issue for participants was one of uncertainty associated with not being sure how to focus on a research question. In general the ideas for research were too broad at this point and arguably there was still a pool from perceptions of research linked loosely to ‘the scientific method’ rather than action and reflection rooted in practice. While participants left the event clear about what they needed to do

*‘To clearly define the research question and evaluate what kind of research I will use, where to find these things and to set down a plan for my research.’*

arguably it would have been helpful to have used the workshop and the immediate period after it to provide a clear structure within which research questions could be developed.

Video-conferencing meeting

This took place later in 2005 and represented one of the techniques employed to maintain contact within the group. Video conferencing was an important tool, especially given the geographical area we were covering (from Shetland down to Edinburgh and from Stornoway across to Inverness). Two of the active researchers/participants could not attend, one through illness. The other experienced problems in creating enough time to kick-start her research and became the group’s non-completer.

Much of the discussion that ensued revolved around the effectiveness of another communication tool, the virtual learning environment, (VLE) Blackboard, referred to above. We used this to communicate ideas and responses between all the members of the group. We discovered that not everyone felt at home with this tool and those who did, found it difficult when they were involved in more than one discussion board group. Because the site was not in daily or regular use, group members found they had to make a point of remembering to check the site. Those that had not used a VLE before found the experience challenging at first, but also useful, given the emphasis on on-line learning that has strongly emerged within UHI.

Other issues discussed concerned:

* how the work was impacting on participant’s own professional practice, especially getting a “bigger picture, beyond our own college”. This reflected the situation of some of the group, in small FE colleges with no research culture. For the first time, participants were obtaining a taste of being in a research community, albeit a small one;
* some members of the group also made associations outside of their research topic to inform involvement in other CPD activity, eg the teaching qualification in further education TQ(FE) and a Masters programme.

Behind these points lay the bigger issue of developing participant’s discipline to engage in research; especially creating the time to do the work. For the mentors, there was a balance to be found; not being too distant and remote, neither being too regular in the contact and creating guilt on the part of the participants for not having spent more time on their research. There were sensitivities to be aware of for both participants and mentors.

Workshop 2

Workshop 2 was initially planned for the end of April, a year after the first workshop and aimed to allow the participants to share with the group the research they had undertaken and also to reflect on the research skills developed. Due to problems with attendance the date was moved to June. However, before the decision to move the workshop the participants were asked to prepare for the workshop by responding to the following questions posted on the discussion board (and also emailed to the participants). The response was to be posted on a discussion board set up specifically for the workshop:

1. What do you feel you've been able to achieve with your research so far?  
2. What problems/difficulties/barriers have you encountered?  
3. How have you tried to overcome them and has anything worked?  
4. What support - if any - have you had from within your institution?  
5. What support would you liked to have had?  
6. How would you do things differently, knowing what you know now?

Two of the participants responded to this request:

Question 1: What do you feel you've been able to achieve with your research so far?

Participant 1: *I am pleased with the progress I have made with my research and enjoyed the fact that I had so long to try it out and am still trying out.*

Participant 2: *My feelings about this project are of being disappointed with myself as much as anything else. The project that I chose was too small to cause me any stress - which I discover is de-motivating. It was similar to work I had done already for PDAR, although with more emphasis on the student than on the project itself. I have discovered that many students seem to find fonts other than the normally used ones (at least in LCC), easier to read, or at least more interesting to look at. I haven't yet pulled it all together to find any correlations - this task I will enjoy and will be done in the next week or two.*

Question 2: What problems/difficulties/barriers have you encountered?

Participant 1: *The problems I've encountered have been more to do with the changes I have tried to implement through my research and it not going the way I expected, but that’s OK because now I know that certain things won't work.*

Participant 2*: I haven't found any barriers, except, as I've said, my own motivation and, of course, pressure of other work taking precedence (HMI etc).*

Question 3: How have you tried to overcome them and has anything worked?

Participant 1: *I have overcome the problems by discussing my research with fellow colleagues and asking for their advice. a lot of my research has come from their answers to my questions and their own observations.*

Participant 2: *No response*

Question 4: What support - if any - have you had from within your institution?

Participant 1*: I've had good support from within my organisation but I think that has only come about because the group I am working with gained an award last year after some really hard work and the college now feel that they are there to stay now. The HMI recent report has also supported this so now I know they will support me.*

Participant 2*: I have had student support - this was the only support I asked for. I have to say, I am pleasantly surprised by the willingness of the student body to assist with this kind of project.*

Question 5: What support would you liked to have had?

Participant 1: *I've been quite happy working away at my own speed and getting through the different stages I had set for my research. My mentor has been there for me if I needed support and I felt in this case that was sufficient.*

Participant 2: *I don't think I really needed any more support - except, perhaps for someone to have said - "this isn't much of a project - how could it be expanded?" In fact, it was just an initial survey to see if there was any material to build upon for a further round of research.*

Question 6: How would you do things differently, knowing what you know now?

Participant 1: *I don’t think I would as I said before I have enjoyed the time to plan and implement and review and try again and this has definitely been the right sequence for me to work at.*

Participant 2*: I would have enlarged the project - having the work that I have done as an initial survey and then taken the results to see if there was an action research project there to take forward. If there was, I could have started it, at least. Still, if that had been the case, I might not have got very far, with everything else going on.*

Both these responses indicate that the participants have gained from taking part in the project; however, what they have gained differs, together with the support they received from others not involved in the project. The main points for Participant 1 are:

* Being able to engage with a project over time is necessary;
* Research provides evidence that challenges expectations;
* Having other colleagues and being able to share with them within a supportive institution is important; a mentor is useful as a point of contact as and when required.

Participant 2 presents differently:

* She recognizes that going for something small and already known to some extent is not always a good idea;
* She blames herself for lack of motivation and not daring to take on anything bigger;
* Her main support has been that students have been willing to engage and she would aim to tackle something bigger if she could;

The June workshop went ahead, in spite of problems with attendance. However, it was felt that we were unlikely to be able to bring all participants together within the time-frame allowed for the project. It was felt that this would allow for an initial summing up of the impact of the project and that those who could not attend would be asked to post their work on the Blackboard site to share with the rest of the group. The participants had been provided with a proforma (see Appendix 2) for reporting on their research which they could use if they found it helpful.

The format of this workshop was less structured but focussed on outcomes, successes encountered by participants. The two that were present reported on their experiences as follows:

**Participant 4**

In terms of outcomes this participant was only just getting started in the second year (June 2006) of the project. This was due to the following:

* She took longer to settle into her new job than anticipated;
* It took her time to gain institutional approval for the project;
* Her core duties were prioritised by her line manager who initially did not wish her to develop the project;
* She had to apply for ethical approval but needed to include the questionnaire she intended to use;
* There were changes to her project due to changes in government legislation in the area she was researching.

However, she is intending to go ahead with the project and it will feed directly into her work. The main issues for her have been:

* Time – the time it takes to set up a project which means she will not produce results for the ESCalate project;
* Financial constraints;
* Doing research in a job that is not supposed to include research, and she wonders how research of this nature could be made to fit in with CPD;
* Developing the questionnaire partially due to lack of skills.

However, the benefits she identifies are that:

* The research will have a professional impact;
* She has been able to identify somebody within the institution who is experienced in questionnaire design, which means she is collaborating with staff within her own institution to develop research skills.

The main learning for her has been:

* How to develop a proposal so that it is ethically acceptable. This led her to sharpen up her thinking and refining the proposal;
* Developing the thinking process overall in relation to how to tackle research.   
  She had to write an information sheet about the research and this also sharpened her understanding;
* Confidence building – having a research project that gained ethical approval;
* The way that her research developed through the ‘Aha’ moments. This occurred to a large extent as a result of having to discuss the research with others and explain its importance.

**Participant 3**: This participant developed her project and produced a report on it (see Appendix 6 for summary of report). She had no particular problems in doing this as she did not require ethical clearance or approval from the institution and the students (all over 18) were willing to participate. All the students were asked to give informed consent.

She identifies her main problems/barriers to be:

* That she did not ask for support and that there was no support provided within her institution; however, she stresses that the students did provide support;
* Engaging with a literature search – she sees this as one of her areas of weakness;
* She does not feel that the actual research will have an impact.

However, whilst she is tending to view the research as limited and also blames herself for not developing it further, it has provided her with the impetus to take some of the ideas forward into the Masters dissertation that she intends to start in the near future.

**Participant 2** could not attend the workshop but did send her completed report.

**Participant 1** was also unable to attend but she had completed a project and she was contacted and participated in a telephone interview with one of the project team members in early October. She was asked to reflect on research skills developed, the benefits of participating, what she may do next in relation to research and the main impact that participating in the ESCalate project had had.

In terms of the overall impact she felt that:

*Escalate has really pushed me forward. I started this project before I started my dissertation … I’m really into research now … [and] I have another plan for setting up a ‘sad’ cafe and linking all aspects of the research together.*

She also mentioned that it has encouraged her to continue doing research:

*Before I couldn’t stop learning, now I can’t stop researching. I’m looking at documents, debates; I’m writing a proposal for research funding (£250K), I’m writing a book about my mother and doing research for that – it’s fascinating – and getting to grips with my search skills again.*

She explained that she had not been engaged in research before so it was all new to her and it helped her to develop in a range of areas:

a) *The reading gave me more depth, helped me to really understand the issues. I had to do a full lit review in order to know what research question I wanted to ask. That really did help me to formulate the questions. A lit review was a whole new experience. Journal searching was hard and someone just sat down and made me do it, but now I know how. There’s just so much stuff out there;*

b) *I had to draft questionnaires and hadn’t done that before either.*

In response to a question how she had dealt with the information that came back in the questionnaires she explained that she did not have time to put them into graph format and that she had devised a method:

*Just looked for themes and similar responses, points of difficulty and suggestion to benefit students. Those were the things I was looking for.*

The other aspect of the project was that it had brought her into contact with a range of other people as she had managed to get the opportunity to speak to people and visit other colleges and see what they were doing in the area she was developing:

*I spoke to someone at Lews Castle and she was great. I also went to Stevenson College (Learning Difficulties) and the lass showed me a lot. They are very clear about what they’re doing and we aren’t as clear. It was really helpful. Then I went to Glasgow Met College and had a fantastic day. They have good facilities and lots of resources, simple aids to learning. I’d never visited anyone before and it was just great. When I returned I looked at different ways of doing things – striving to get students to work consistently without supervision.*

A further aspect of the project that she had found helpful was that she had combined doing research with using a reflective journal on a regular basis. The research journal was not a specific feature of this project; however, those involved are all familiar with them. It seems that practices from other CPD activities have encouraged two of the participants to engage in journal writing to good effect.

*Reflective journal as a regular task (weekly). I hadn’t done that so conscientiously before. I put that into the research to keep reminding myself what was happening.*

She also felt that she had learnt about writing up a project;

*This was the first time I’d written something so significant although [mentor] said it was more like an assignment than a research paper, and now I see he was right.*

When asked what she thought a research paper should look like she explained:

*It should have a beginning, middle and end; it should ‘make sense’ and have a logic. I needed to put it away and come back to it later to see all the flaws – take out the rubbish. I feel like I know a lot more about writing now.*

Finally she emphasised that she had really enjoyed and that it had been an authentic experience for her:

*I really enjoyed this. I felt quite passionate – it was real, about reality and I like to see results, so it was just right for me. I need to be interested in something in order to do research.*

*The online discussion boards were helpful too, for the same reason. I could talk to other people about my ideas and get different perspectives. It also let people talk who might have been a bit more reluctant or shy.*

**Participant 5** did not manage to complete her research or a report; however, she has still gained from being part of the project. It does highlight that, for a project such as ESCalate, participants’ outcomes may differ and the intended product may not materialise. However, those that agreed to take part have nonetheless gained from it. The most important thing she has learnt she felt was:

*Other people are happy to mentor and help me with research. We have now established a research group in the college that meets every Friday, and that is useful, although I’m probably going to be teaching on a Friday soon.*

*Keeping a research journal has been the most useful outcome of the Escalate project for me. It helps me work through my thoughts and keep track of them. I think in pictures, so my journal is full of diagrams and mind maps and ‘side-thoughts’. But using the journal to set down my thoughts allows me to ‘put ideas to bed’ and means I can leave those thoughts and move on. I can stop thinking about some things and take my ideas further forward. I find it’s best not to date entries in my journal; that way I don’t feel guilty if I haven’t put anything in for awhile and I don’t feel I have to do it. I’m still keeping my journal and using it for my Master’s research.*

When asked about the research skills that she felt she had developed, she explained the following:

1. *Realising the need to refine and scope a research question. Originally I wanted to research a topic that was just huge. I realised I hadn’t been concise enough, there was too much literature and I would probably have difficulty collecting data, so there might have been a problem with methodology;.*
2. *Learning to think things through a bit better. I wanted to make my research useful and I needed to think about how to do that;*
3. *Keeping a research journal was a very constructive way to follow my thought processes. I’d never kept a journal like this before, but it’s been so useful I am still doing it;*
4. *Downloading articles and collecting resources. I learned something about this through a course at Edinburgh, but the Escalate project enabled me to practice this skill;*
5. *Networking and contacting other people who were interested in my topic.*

She also felt that she had gained from being part of the Escalate project:

*Knowing other people were interested in research was an important aspect of this project for me. No one in my department or college seems to do research or seems to be very interested in trying. The Escalate network was important to me, even though I struggled to get onto Blackboard and didn’t make the best use of that medium. I never felt I had done enough work to contribute to the discussion. It also wasn’t easy for me to communicate without feeling I had something solid and substantial to contribute.*

Her comment here highlights an important issue for the project leaders in terms of what makes participants engage in a virtual community such as the one we tried to create on Blackboard. This particular participant felt that she could not take part because she had not done enough. She also identified a problem in her own college and that was lack of others in her college that were involved with research. This view is reinforced by the one member of the project team who also came from this college:

*We had a college research committee but it needs to be regenerated, and the current restructuring should be an opportunity for that. Up to now the support hasn’t been particularly good, but I expect it will improve.*

In addition, she identified a general problem across the UHI in relation to developing research in particular areas:

*There is a UHI research committee which is very active, but their focus is on mainstream research (which impacts on the RAE).*

*In UHI we are always trying to do things on a marginal basis. Management expects HE/FE staff to carry out research – and has a policy – but there’s no time allocated for it and not much financial incentive. It just ‘falls off the table’ in the face of other demands on our time. Staff can apply for special funds and/or for sabbatical however, and that has really helped those who have successfully applied. These opportunities though are mainly for more traditional research; action research is different.*

She elaborated and explained that there was some discussion of action research but that it was mostly talk and no action.

Whilst Participant 5 has no intention of taking her original project forward it affected her thinking about her topic for her Masters research project:

*Thinking about the ESCalate project has helped me to think about my Masters research project, although I am completely changing the topic. I want to look at the role of a VLE in the teaching of sports; I’m interested in investigating how the VLE (CLAN) can support ‘Earn and Learn’ where students are working and learning at the same time. I am currently collecting resources related to this topic.*

As mentioned, she did not complete a project and she explained that this was because she had faced a number of difficulties:

*I began to realise how much time it (research) takes. I have so many other things to do – work and family – and found it hard to make time to get on with the project and stay motivated. We had serious staff shortages in my department for 2 years, so I had a very heavy workload and things were really difficult. I was just so busy I couldn’t get on top of it. I also didn’t want to give up more time to travel to meetings.*

She clearly feels that participating in the project, even in a more limited way has provided her with insights, this includes what she has identified as her most important, immediate learning need in relation to doing research:

*Learning about how to select the most appropriate methodology to address my research question(s). I’m not sure I would know which approach would be best and why.*

**Mentoring**

At the first workshop (April 2005) the role of mentors was explained and participants were allocated to a mentor. As there were five mentors and five participants it was possible to have one-to-one mentoring. None of the mentors worked in the same institution as the participant and this meant the mentoring was mainly carried out via the use of email with the occasional supportive phone call, and encouragement over the VLE discussion board.

One issue that arose out of the mentoring arrangements is that of potential role confusion. One of the mentors was also involved with the participant as a tutor on another course. It may be that this should be avoided. However, in small organisations this is not always possible, and the participant did not comment on this in the evaluation and generally felt that the mentor had provided effective support. It may be that awareness of potential problems helped to avoid clashes of roles.

In terms of mentoring contact Participant 1 identified her main need as:

*Regular contact time and talking on the phone was what I needed.*

She further explained what she found effective actions from her mentor:

*He prompted me often: ‘How are you getting on? Do you want to talk on the phone?’ He helped me keep on time and target. I completed it in time and Ian kept me right. He also let me know when he would be away. He was very good and asking questions to make me think: ‘How will you do that?’ What’s your time frame?’ types of questions. Sometimes he would say ‘that’s rubbish’, but that was fine – it was.*

Participant 5 also noted that her mentor had been in continuous contact but she felt guilty about not producing enough work and found it difficult to communicate on email:

*He was always in contact with me, asking if I needed help or if I’d like to talk about anything. He tried really hard. I just didn’t respond. I was so reluctant to communicate because I wanted to have something solid to discuss and I didn’t. I found it hard to write something on email too.*

She did not find the subject area of the mentor mattered but did feel somebody local would have been easier to communicate with:

*I don’t think it matters whether your mentor is in the same subject area or not; it’s the networking and support that’s most important. I think it would have been better to have mentor support locally. I didn’t feel there was anyone in my college who could mentor me, so I felt quite isolated. I think if I had got the research question right and had the local support, I would have been OK.*

One of the project team mentors also raised the issue about mentoring at a distance. There was also a range of issues identified by the team in relation to mentoring. The mentoring relationship was possibly the least thought-out aspect of the project as it had been agreed that each mentor-mentee pair would work out how they wanted to develop the relationship. It clearly worked for some but in reflection at the final workshop the following were considered:

* Would it have been better to use the five project team members as a ‘pool’ of critical friends that could be contacted by any of the participants? However, the mentors did act as ‘prodders’ in terms of encouraging the development of the project and this function is likely to have been lost. It was clear that Participant 1 found the questioning and support of her mentor useful;
* For the mentors there was a problem of when to intervene. If there had been no contact for a while what might be the reason? And would an email asking about progress possibly arrive at bad time? What would happen if there was no response and a further email was sent? We have not come up with any answers to this. One of the mentors certainly felt this was problematic, particularly when her mentee responded after some time explaining that the lack of contact had been because of personal problems;
* Another aspect for the mentors was potential clash of roles. Were they tutors (for example, in relation to developing research skills) or critical friends who commented more generally?;
* A further issue was about the need to revisit the relationships between the pairs and consider reallocation of mentors. This did not happen but may have been useful.

This has led to the consideration that it might have been helpful to develop a set of guidelines for mentors and those that are being mentored. It may also be that a set of ground-rules agreed upon at the beginning would have been helpful. In terms of providing greater access for the participants to all the project team more effective use of the discussion boards could be considered.

**Online discussion board**

The VLE used was Blackboard. There were 7 discussion topics or threads created in total for the duration of the project. The discussion board was set up by the UHI vle Administrator. It was password protected so allowed only those taking part in the project to access it. The following discussion boards were created; figures in bracket shows the number of messages created in each thread:

Welcome (9)

Evaluations of Spring 05 workshop (5)

Revised research questions (14)

Progress so far (5)

December 05 video conference meeting (2)

Spring 06 workshop (5)

Completed reports (6)

The discussion thread attracting the most contributions was the one covering revised research questions. This was set up to allow for interaction and evolution of the participants’ research themes and questions. It was, perhaps, inevitable to be the most active thread.

One response from a mentor to a participant read:

*Lots of good stuff here and also a very topical area which a number of my colleagues in Lews Castle will be very interested to see what you come up with. School kids in (FE) college now is a huge issue and we have considerable numbers from the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway (same as the Lerwick Anderson High) coming in for Care courses as well as Highers in English and Psychology. So I expect there'll be willing correspondents here if you think it worthwhile to enlist any comparisons.  
Your Action Plan is good too and provides a clear set of deadlines to aim for.*

Another contribution form a participant indicated her progress and ended with a question for her mentor. Both participant and mentor’s posting is set out below:

*Participant 2*

*I have done my first interview and got some answers from 7 of the 9 people participating in the typography project but I feel that my interview techniques are a bit (a lot) too limited. Although willing, most of the students in the group didn't seem to have any opinions about whether they found any difficulty reading some kinds of text - perhaps on the whole they are very young yet to have experienced many problems of the sort I am thinking of. As a result the data that I gathered seems very limited.  
  
One thing I am clear on is that I need to find somewhere more congenial for interviews than a classroom (too spread out and PCs in the way), the refectory (too noisy) or the seating area in the main entrance (too public).  
  
It may, of course, be that my project is far too simple to elicit much in the way of answers.  
  
This doesn't mean that there isn't a lot to do in the next few weeks - I will be taking these students through different ways to format text and different layouts and they may then develop opinions (that's what I'm hoping for anyway).  
  
Are there any suggestions of where to look for information on interview techniques?*

*Mentor*

*My first feeling when reading this was a sense that 'I have been there too'!! I interviewed a group of primary children for our research project (an evaluation of a pilot project that we are doing for Scottish Exec.) ... and I thought there is an awful lot of me talking and trying to encourage a response! So don't be despondent - interviewing is quite hard! However, it is quite important to look at what you have got - if they don't express a preference maybe that tells you something! I found when I started to look at my data in more detail that there were snippets of views that I hadn't seen first time round.  
  
If what you are finding is contradictory to what you expected that is OK - it is telling you that perhaps this is not the problem you expected it to be. So make sure that you don't dismiss your data. Examine in detail and try to summarise what it is actually telling you.*

These 3 postings are typical of the entries made on the VLE and provide an idea of the content and of the type of exchanges made. While usage of the discussion board proved not as extensive as had been hoped, it represented an important communication tool, opening up participants, especially those in remote locations, to ideas and ways of thinking that they might not otherwise have encountered. It also indicates in a small way a developing community of practice. One aspect of Wenger’s community of practice focuses on development of trust between those in the community. The exchange between the participant and the mentor shows a participant who is prepared to share her lack of knowledge in a particular area with the rest of the participants and mentors.

**Summary, conclusion and some recommendations**

It is worth at this point to return to the objectives of the Escalate project and consider the extent to which the project has achieved its aims. The objectives were to:

* develop research capacity in FE staff engaged in FE and/or HE teaching;
* make use of small scale action research projects to contextualise this development within the staff’s own professional practice;
* engage with aspects of learning and teaching as part of the process of capacity building;
* encourage the ability of staff to disseminate their findings through publication of their findings in academic journals and/or to present at conferences.

It is clear from the accounts of the participants, even the one who ‘failed’ to produce an outcome that they feel that they have developed research skills. They have learnt not just new skills that they can apply but also what does not work. The examples (see appendix 6) of projects also demonstrate that four out of the five participants engaged with research of some kind in relation to their own practice. Whether it can all be considered truly action research, if that is to include two cycles and demonstrate change in practice is debatable. However, the framework provided by an action research approach provided a means for thinking through how research can be linked to practice.

All the participants engaged with some aspect of their own practice and explored aspects of their teaching (or intend to do so in case of Participant 5) and the accounts from the participants demonstrate that they all engaged in learning in a range of ways. It is interesting to note that two of the participants commented on the value of using a reflective journal to support their development as researchers.

The final objective has not yet been achieved. None of those involved have produced a final journal article or presented on this particular project at a conference. However, it may be that there will be later opportunities.

The expected outcomes or deliverables from the project were:

1. A set of activities that can be used within a range of settings to develop research capability
2. A plan for a workshop that can be adapted to a range of different settings
3. A set of ‘mini-projects’ that can be used within a range of settings where practitioners wish to undertake a small scale enquiry into their own teaching.

All of these outcomes have been achieved and the resources developed are included in the Appendices. However, the project team feel that, whilst the initial workshop did provide the participants with guidance in developing their initial plans, it did not entirely address the difficulties of developing effective research questions.

However, whilst this project has had an impact on the participants in this project it is evident that developing a more wide spread research culture in a context which has not previously included research activity is not an easy task. It is interesting to note that the one project team member who was involved the least explained that this was for the same reason as Participant 5 found it difficult to engage with the project:

*Yes, I’d love to be more active in getting others started. Just talking about personal experiences can be helpful to others and I would certainly offer [to participate again] However, I found that answering your first questions was embarrassing for me. I wanted to support and mentor my colleagues, but it just didn’t work; I couldn’t find the time and have been doing a lot of ‘fire-fighting’. I didn’t feel I did very much. … I would think long and hard next time about whether I could commit and make a real contribution. I’d love to do it, but only if I felt I could really manage it.*

This raises the important issue for staff working in FE and HE, especially one like UHI that encompasses both in a tertiary environment. It is often tempting to respond positively to initiatives such as the ESCalate Research programme, but creating and managing the time in an already over-loaded schedule can simply compound the problems of organising ones time. The colleague quoted above is herself trying to complete an EdD while simultaneously holding down a demanding and stressful senior management position within a UHI partner college. Scaife (2004) explores the development of research in an FE setting and also comments on the lack of ‘organisational ‘space’ or time’ available in FE for ongoing research. He argues that FE colleges operate in a ‘culture of the now’ and that this is based on three factors. The first he refers to as ‘structural instability’, the second as ‘the management of risk’ and the third that FE colleges do not treat their employees as their most valuable assets. Whilst our project did not collect data to explore Scaife’s views it is clear that many Scottish FE colleges (including some UHI colleges) have experienced financial difficulties which is likely to impact on the extent to which they would engage in research which may not bring an income at this stage. A number of them have also undergone restructuring which impacts on staff deployment. It is not for this project to comment on the extent to which college managers value their staff. One further interesting point made by Scaife though was that there was a great willingness and creative imagination amongst, at least some staff in the colleges. This is clearly what we have also seen in our project.

Cunningham and Foster (2002) are more optimistic about the development of a research culture and demonstrate that linking action research type projects to staff development can have an impact. They had a more ambitious programme within a single college which offered accreditation for the work undertaken. They argue that student experience has been enhanced as a result of these type of projects but warn that the demands on staff time is considerable – equally so for those supporting those engaging in research and those undertaking the research.

Hillier and Jamieson (2003) make many similar points. Not biting off more than you can chew, small scale action research, focussing on topics that aid teaching and learning, and being part of a research community are all points that we echo.

Hamilton, reporting in Reflect (2006) also comments on the positive experiences and skills developed by those that participated and she paints a picture similar to ours. In addition the difficulties identified are similar in that time and a lack of funding can become barriers to this type of research. Beyond this we have also identified contextual factors such as the lack of a research culture in the institutions.

Clearly then there is other research that has come up with similar conclusions to ours. Developing research capability through the use of an action research type approach does have an impact on those that engage in it. It thus supports this approach as one means of developing research capability; however, it requires institutional commitment in terms of resources and support.

Recommendations

* This type of research clearly helps those engaged to develop research skills if suitably supported. It can also act as a form of CPD. It would therefore be worthwhile for institutions that wish to develop a research culture to explore the use of action type research in relation to teaching and learning;
* However, any institution that decides to take this forward should consider the support provided for those participating and develop networks which include those already reasonably proficient in research to mentor those developing skills. There would also be a need to develop an attitude within the institutions which values research amongst all staff;
* If networks are established consider using a range of ways of supporting them including the development of online facilities. This could include further development of a dedicated space to include links to e.g. research literature or research tools developed by others, e.g. through the TLRP research capacity building network;
* Institutions considering this approach also need to consider allowing time (e.g. as CPD) for developing these skills and also how development of research skills might impact on future career developments. Incentives for staff to participate should also be considered. We offered a small sum of money; however, time to conduct research is likely to be the most important support that can be offered to staff;
* It should also be noted that there is a risk involved when using project money to develop research capacity. It can be useful to provide a starting point; however, unless the institution is willing to support further development, for example through staff development, engagement in research is likely to dwindle.

Finally the views of the least engaged project team member provides a fitting conclusion:

*I think it’s a good idea. I think some people are ‘frightened to start research’ so small scale projects like those Escalate was meant to support provide an opportunity for a ‘first step’. I think it’s probably much less scary that way. And it’s important to have mentoring or support from others when you are starting out.*

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