

SCEPTRe FELLOWSHIP 2008/09
Professional Training, Critical Reflection and Peer Support:
Making the placement year work for others
Dr Jenny Willis, Registry

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

My submission for a SCEPTRe research fellowship was grounded in the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy:

*'It [the university] will ensure that its students are given opportunities for full engagement in the planning and development of their own learning; it will draw upon modern technologies in its approaches to learning and teaching; **it will excel in its provision of professional education**; [...] programme contents will be continually updated to reflect **changing needs and new knowledge**; and **its students will be at the centre of its learning and teaching strategies**.'*

University of Surrey Learning and Teaching Strategy 2007, 1.1.3

Throughout a career in the secondary sector which took me from classroom teaching to deputy headship of a comprehensive school, all in socially deprived areas, and at times of immense pedagogical change e.g. the advent of GCSEs then the Education Reform Act 1988, I had been at the leading edge of initiatives to motivate and challenge expectations. This routinely entailed curriculum development, resource production, management of staff, critical evaluation and adoption of rapidly changing technology. As a lecturer, staff tutor and researcher for the Open University, I was later able to experience these same challenges in the field of higher education. My doctoral thesis brought together these diverse interests and experiences in an exploration of how access to one subject (foreign languages) had been covertly manipulated to sustain social hierarchies in the UK, a situation which was undermined by changing technologies.

Whilst my formal role as an Assistant Registrar is able to draw from my professional experience, I felt only peripheral to the student learning experience until a serendipitous situation led me to undertake consultancy to process and analyse student feedback on their professional training year. For five years now, I have been responsible for the analysis of the annual questionnaire completed by level 3 students on their return from professional training (PT). In 2005/06 and 2007/08 we also surveyed students who opted out of professional training, going straight on to level 3 from level 2 study. This work has been complementary to, but separate from, my formal position in Registry.

In the summer of 2007, Professor Neil I Ward became Chairman of the Professional Training and Careers Committee (PTCC) and I Secretary. Under his direction, Professional Training has entered a new phase. My formal Registry role is inseparable from the research needs of PT. Much of my time over the last two years has been taken up in data gathering and analysis in the area of PT, complementing my rich insight into the student experience as revealed through the annual survey.

Parallel to these developments, in 2004 I was invited by the then Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching to join the team writing what would be a successful submission to become a Centre of Excellence for Teaching and Learning. Since SCEPTRe's inception, I have been involved in its various initiatives designed to enhance critical reflection, e.g. the Appreciative Enquiry exercise of 2007. I began to compare the accumulating feedback from the annual student survey and to investigate theoretical models for its analysis. This work was consistent with the direction in which SCEPTRe was travelling, but conducted

outside my formal Registry role. The boundaries between roles are constantly blurred, but I have been a consistent supporter of SCEPTRe events, and produced a workshop and paper for the Centre in 2007 and contributed to the 2009 conference Learning to be Professional through a Life-Wide Curriculum.

Since assuming our new responsibilities for PT, Professor Ward and I have sought to work closely with SCEPTRe. In September 2008, we and other academic colleagues drew upon the University's work in respect of PT and critical reflection, sending a delegation of 9 to the World Association of Co-operative Education (WACE) annual conference in Sydney. I contributed 3 papers and co-facilitation of a workshop run by Professor Ward and his counterparts from two other countries.

One of our objectives for PT is to raise the University's profile nationally and internationally through such active involvement in journals and conferences. To this end, my personal area of research aims both to enhance the experience of our own students and to contribute to the development of PT elsewhere. I shall be presenting 3 related, peer-reviewed papers at the 2009 WACE conference in Vancouver and have been invited to develop one of my papers for a special edition of the Higher Education Research and Development Journal or the Asia-Pacific Journal of Co-operative Education.

This report charts the work I have been able to conduct thanks to the award of a SCEPTRe Fellowship. I must record my appreciation of SCEPTRe for giving me the opportunity to bridge this gap between administrative and research roles, an illustration of the team's willingness to embrace the novel, and to Professor Ward for encouraging me to fulfil my academic ambitions.

EMERGENCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Some conceptual issues

My research area evolved from a focus on assessment and learning outcomes for purposes of quality assurance, to the pedagogy of work- and enquiry-based learning and curriculum development in order to facilitate learners' critical reflection. The decision to discontinue award of the Associateship of the University of Surrey (discussed below) was a reminder of the continuing challenge we face in gaining legitimacy for such forms of learning (see e.g. Boud and Symes 2000). Potentially, my research would contribute to the internal debate on how we can give recognition to the learning that takes place during PT, irrespective of the variation in the depth and range of such learning experiences. I found alliance with the views of Smith and Betts (2000) that quality should be judged against the process of reflection regarding intended learning outcomes. I was clearly entering the territory of what Griffiths and Guile (2004) have described as calling for a 'connective pedagogy' which would bring together development of both academic and practical knowledge.

One of my principal difficulties was that in judging competence in the workplace we are dealing with a value-laden, social construct. Furthermore, some authors e.g. Hays et al. 2003, distinguish between *competence*, as tested under controlled conditions, and *performance*, as demonstrated on an everyday basis. Notions of competence are further complicated by their relativity to an individual's stage of professional experience, leading to debate around what may be deemed 'good enough' (e.g. Furness and Gilligan 2004) at any given point. For Eraut (2004) competence is conceived in the short, medium and long

term, through a learning trajectory bundle where competences combine in differing permutations.

But if the assessment of competence in work-based learning (WBL) and enquiry-based learning (EBL) is contentious, how much more elusive is a definition of what constitutes critical reflection? Various scales have been proposed, including, for example, that of Palmer et al. (1994) which relates it to three levels, from 1, mainly description, 2, awareness of personal values and beliefs to 3, acknowledgement of wider disciplines and interpretations.

One solution to the problem might be to employ a mixture of scientifically measurable and judgemental methods (e.g. Knight and Yorke 2003). Brennan and Little (1996) offer a useful tabulation of assessment methods and their respective application to WBL. Beyond the question of methods lie the nature of assessments and who should conduct them: a workplace supervisor? A visiting academic? The learner/novice? A combination of these? Writers e.g. Yorke 2005, caution that a balance must be struck between too few categories of assessment for the assessment to be reliable and too many for the process to be unmanageable.

Whilst sensitised to these and other issues relating to assessment of WBL and EBL, and the inter-relation of assessment and curriculum planning, I did not wish to constrain my own research by prematurely aligning myself with an existing epistemological model. I preferred to leave open the possibility of developing my own, bottom-up theory. Nevertheless, I could not ignore the warning that

“Higher education may be making summative assessments with reference to a paradigm that is becoming decreasingly defensible as the complexity of assessment becomes apparent.” (Yorke 2005:43)

And as Barnett (2000) argues so cogently, it is not only assessment that is increasingly complex: the very world of the 21st century is fraught with unpredictability and interpretability. Universities must prepare their students for a world where

“professional life is increasingly becoming a matter not just of handling overwhelming data and theories within a given frame of reference (a situation of complexity) but also a matter of handling multiple frames of understanding, of action and of self-identity.” (Barnett 2000:6)

In other words, it is not only opportunities for applying existing, and acquiring new, *knowledge* that the PT experience should support: students must have opportunities to *act* in order to realise (*become*) themselves. Again we are drawn back to the difficulty of assessing notions of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, and forced to confront deep philosophical issues regarding values and interpretation.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, I had been striving for five years to make sense of the student feedback produced in the annual survey of level 3 students on their return to the University from placement.

Student feedback on their PT experience

The annual PT survey was originally intended as a means of quality assurance. As such, questions were largely factual e.g. the number of visits received during placement, or they sought levels of student satisfaction e.g. with the feedback they received from their placement supervisors. The questionnaire encouraged openness by being anonymous

unless students chose to provide their name. The final section invited them to add any comments they wished to make.

From the first year of my analysis of the survey (placements 2003/04), I was struck by the proportion of respondents who choose to comment in this open section, and by the extent of their feedback. Instinctively, my educational background was pulling me more towards this than the quantitative data. I transcribed their comments verbatim, and set about a thematic analysis. For the first time in the history of the questionnaire, I produced a full report of the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, and made it available to all interested parties in Schools (now Faculties) and support services.

By the second year of my analysis, and in line with other initiatives relating to Learning and Teaching, including the imminent introduction of Professional Development Planning (PDP) for Higher Education students in the UK¹, I was able to compare themes emerging annually from their comments. These I categorised by their positive or negative nature. Each of these sub-sets was then analysed according to whether the comment related to the University, Employer or were general. The framework enabled me to make longitudinal comparisons. Statistically, I was able to track the frequency of comments on a given theme e.g. the importance of feeling trusted and valued, and I illustrated the analysis with appropriate quotations from each cohort of respondents.

From the expanding literature on critical reflection and research into the processes of WBL and EBL, it was evident that my own findings were consistent with the work of authors such as Eraut (2003) and Yorke & Knight (2004). Initially, I found particular synergy with the latter's model, which focuses on the development of **U**nderstanding, **S**kills, **E**fficacy Benefits and **M**etacognition (USEM).

Developed through the UK's Higher Education Academy, Yorke and Knight's work on embedding employability into the curriculum addresses precisely those issues which interested me. They had identified those four inter-related components required for developing individuals for employability and life beyond:

- Understanding of subject matter
- Skills and skilled practices
- Efficacy beliefs, students' beliefs about themselves and their personal qualities
- Metacognition, self-awareness regarding their own learning, their capacity to reflect on this and the action required next

To test whether my evolving analysis was consistent with a respected model, without necessarily seeking to adopt it for my work, I mapped my findings of the 2005/06 qualitative data against the USEM categories. Table 1 overleaf illustrates the outcome for that one year. The first column contains the USEM theme, the second lists the corresponding themes from my own analysis, the third gives the raw score for numbers of citation of the theme, and the final column converts the score to a percentage of each subset. So, for example, I found 9 themes relating to efficacy benefits, represented by 564 individual comments. 46.3% of these comments (n = 261) were about self-confidence or assertiveness.

¹ A requirement of UK universities since 2005/06

Table 1 Emergent themes compared with the USEM model

USEM, Knight & Yorke 2004	Student comments 2005/06 Question 21	N	% subset
UNDERSTANDING (Deeper than knowledge)	1 Knowledge of specific industry	119	46.5
	2 Work ethics	111	43.4
	3 New culture	13	5.1
	4 Understanding/appreciating others' perspectives	7	2.7
	5 First hand knowledge	6	2.3
Subset % of total comments: 18.4%		256	100%
SKILLS (Including practising them)	1 Time-management/ organisation	162	43.0
	2 Team-working/ interpersonal/ communication	76	20.1
	3 IT competence/ familiarity with named new software	29	7.7
	4 Presentation skills	19	5.0
	5 Foreign language	4	1.1
	6 Practical	51	13.5
	7 Report writing, use of journals, research skills	17	4.5
	8 Problem solving/ analysis	7	1.9
	9 Unspecified 'skills'	12	3.2
Subset % of total comments: 27%		377	100%
EFFICACY BENEFITS (Views of self and personal qualities)	1 Increased self-confidence/ assertiveness	261	46.3
	2 Attained maturity	75	13.3
	3 Become more independent	40	7.1
	4 Become 'more rounded'/ self-aware/ self-critical	86	15.2
	5 Perseverance/ tolerance of stress	4	0.7
	6 More focused/ committed	34	6.0
	7 Ready for responsibility/ leadership/ risk taking/proactive	26	4.6
	8 Professional attitude	25	4.4
	9 More open minded/ patient/ empathetic	13	2.3
Subset % of total comments: 40.4%		564	100%*
METACOGNITION (Reflection on learning)	1 Increased motivation to study and/or achieve a good degree/ ambitious/ career advancement	44	22.2
	2 Determined career plan	88	44.4
	3 Apply theory to practice	32	16.2
	4 More cultured	1	0.5
	5 Competitive advantage	8	4.0
	6 Ready for final year	7	3.5
	7 Networking/contacts	10	5.1
	8 Understand relevance of Years 1 and 2	8	4.0
Subset % of total comments: 14.2%		198	100%*
TOTAL	100%	1395	

Respondents question 21: 472/488 = 96.7% response rate

* Decimal points rounded up

I have retrospectively mapped the previous years' data on to this framework, resulting in a 3-year overview. Whilst this analysis provided reassurance of consistency between the University's indicators and those of other researchers, it still relied on a statistical count, and did not maximise the wealth of qualitative feedback provided by the annual survey. Surely more could be learnt from this?

I was fundamentally dealing with what Knight (2006) described as 'wicked competences':

..."achievements that cannot be neatly pre-specified, take time to develop and resist measurement-based approaches to assessment. They are important to *higher* education, since they are widely valued by employers and smooth the path of study and other forms of research." (Knight 2006:2)

The term aptly captures the difficulties we face in assessing such competences, though we readily recognise when they are present. Again, we are put in mind of Barnett's notion of becoming through acting on knowledge.

By now, I had also encountered Eraut's (2003) identification of learning and context factors conducive to learning in the workplace (the support learners receive, their confidence and commitment to the task, and the challenge and perceived value of their work.) Impressionistically, these factors appeared consistent with the issues cited by our students in their annual feedback, but once again, I resisted adoption of an existing model, preferring to examine my data as objectively as was possible.

The changing context of Higher Education and PT

The University had, since its days as Battersea Polytechnic, been a leader in the provision of applied studies, what would, fifty years later, become known as 'sandwich courses'. These courses were explicitly designed to meet the country's industrial, economic and reputational needs, whilst at the same time recognising "the fact that God had given a young man more than one side to his character." (Hogg 1897) But this once-unique selling point has long ceased to be a mark of distinction. As universities compete to survive and governmental funding has increasingly targeted the development of employable graduates, the putative benefits of a University of Surrey degree become more difficult to sell.

And even those students who do enrol at the University may not avail themselves of the opportunity to undertake a year on professional placement prior to their final year of study. A mythical figure had been perpetuated in the University's publicity materials, suggesting that 70-80% of undergraduates have a PT year. No-one had the statistical evidence to substantiate this so, in early 2008, I set about research into the archives. Data were difficult to collate, and figures were constantly changing. At which point of the year were they most likely to be reliable? Had those held centrally been updated with the information held locally? Should all programmes be included, or only those where PT is optional? These were just some of the difficulties that had, doubtlessly, deterred previous collation of the data.

The outcome of this exercise was that we now have a longitudinal set of data, which is being updated annually, for each academic year from 2003/04. However the statistics are manipulated, they reveal that a figure of 50% is more realistic for those who *choose* to participate in professional training. Reasons for opting out of PT were investigated in the two surveys mentioned above. These showed that some students had sound reasons for not undertaking PT e.g. they had previous work experience, but others could have been encouraged had they had a clearer understanding of the process and potential benefits of participation.

There was already concern that, with the discontinuation² of formal recognition of the PT experience, through award of the Associateship of the University of Surrey, some students would be reluctant to engage fully with the assessment process. (See below).

Now an additional obstacle has arisen: the 'financial downturn', or recession. Even those students who do want to undertake placement, and some of those already on placement,

² Final award 2009/10

are finding that opportunities are reduced and, in some cases, contracts are being terminated prematurely as businesses succumb to the economic crash.

How to make the PT experience of some work for the benefit of all?

These diverse factors combined with my research interest in the transformative experience reported by students on their return from placement and led to my proposal for a fellowship that would explore the actual nature of a range of placements. This would be a qualitative study, involving students and PT tutors. Following discussion with Professor Ward and SCEPTRe, three questions were formulated:

- Can we identify and draw benefit from the student PT experience in order to enhance the curriculum?
- What can we do at Level 3 to build on and extend the development of those who undertook a placement year?
- What can we do to enhance Level 3 for all students, including those who did not undertake a placement year?

This work would contribute to the debate on a Life-Wide Curriculum and the issues surrounding accreditation of the professional experience. It aimed to produce evidence to inform future curriculum planning, hence enhancement of the student experience at the University of Surrey.

RESEARCH METHODS AND INSTRUMENTS

Existing data sources

It will be apparent that there was already a vast body of qualitative, written data, collected through the annual PT survey. Over the years, PTCC, SCEPTRe and the Careers and other support services had been contributing to the gradual refinement of the open-ended questions in this survey in order to encourage greater critical reflection. This inevitably changed the nature of the survey: whilst the first sections remained quality-assurance focused, the final part facilitated reflection, of potential value to the student and to the University. By 2007/08, the questionnaire was as illustrated in Annex A.

My transcription of every comment was included in the annual reports, which were now widely circulated, and to which Faculties responded at PTCC. The longitudinal data had, as noted above, been analysed first within my own framework, then against the USEM model. Annex B shows a one-page extract of the raw qualitative data for 2007/08.

Data source 1: qualitative feedback, student PT survey, placements 2003/4 to 2007/08

Assessment of Professional Training (P credits)

The research co-incided with a period of significant change across the University. With the advent to Higher Education of a student transcript to accompany their degree award³, a decision had been taken to discontinue the University's own award for those who had undertaken professional placement. This, the Associateship of the University of Surrey (AUS), was deemed to be redundant alongside the transcript and to have had insufficient

³ HEA requirement from 200

recognition by employers. Nevertheless, a strong call was made by the PT community for replacement of the AUS. Many colleagues feared that, without accreditation for their work during the placement year, students would see no need to comply with the assessment process. In another illustration of the inextricability of my formal role as Secretary to PTCC and my research interest, I undertook a preliminary analysis of the nature of assessment across all subject areas. This would provide an overview of how departments were interpreting the regulations on assessment.

The University regulations are set within the Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice for work-based and placement learning⁴. These recognise that

"it may not be possible for all students in work-based or placement learning situations to have exactly the same learning experiences. It is important, however, that they all have opportunities to achieve the same learning outcomes, and that support is provided for the student if circumstances change and s/he is no longer able to achieve the outcomes in the agreed setting(s)." QAA op. cit. p.10

The QAA permits credit value for both the amount of learning and its relative level of difficulty. Assessments must be designed so as to test whether the agreed learning outcomes have been achieved, and tests must be accurate and fair.

The University accredits professional experience (work or study) of 46 or more weeks if paid, or 30 weeks minimum if 'unpaid'⁵. 120 Professional (P) credits are available, with a pass level of 40%. The P credits may be recognised through the award of the AUS, discussed above, or as part of the degree classification. The AUS offers 3 levels of award: award (40%); with merit (60%); with distinction (70%).

The actual parameters for assessing PT are set out in the Calendar, Section C, as follows:

Level P descriptor:

Develop and/or apply theory and develop skills independently in external educational settings or in practical and operational contexts;
Develop knowledge and skills which can contribute to subsequent project work and study;
Develop transferable skills and improvement in presentation, communication, team-working and interpersonal skills in a professional context.

Assessment must comprise:

[Areas below may be combined]	% of 120 P credits
Student performance in workplace assessed by employer	30-50
Student report(s)	30-50
Oral presentation by student	up to 10
Report by visiting tutor	5-20
Student participation in briefing and debriefing	up to 20
Additional academic work during placement	up to 30

⁴ QAA CODE OF PRACTICE FOR THE ASSURANCE OF ACADEMIC QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION Section 9: Work-based and placement Learning September 2007

⁵ A placement is considered to be unpaid for any salary below the threshold for income tax

These regulations give considerable scope for variation across subject areas and there had been no previous collation of how departments interpreted them. In 2008, I therefore made a first draft of this information. It has subsequently been circulated to departments for confirmation or amendment. The final document is shown in Table 2, overleaf.

Data source 2: overview of P credits by subject area, 2008/09

NB This is both a data source for, and an output of, this fellowship.

As anticipated, the data show diverse practice in the respective weighting given to the nature of assessment and in the person responsible for conducting the assessment. The data do not provide any detail of the learning outcomes required to achieve these P credits. A deeper level of analysis was thus called for if I were to compare categories with those identified in my earlier work and in other models e.g. the USEM model discussed above.

Table 2 Assessment of Professional Training by Programme, University of Surrey 2009

ASSESSMENT AND P CREDITS			ASSESSMENT MODE						
Faculty	Programme		By workplace	Student report	Presentation	By visiting tutor	Attendance of briefing/ debriefing	Additional academic work	TOTAL P CREDITS
FAHS	Music		40	10 + 30	10	20	10		120
	Music & sound Recording		40	20 + 30	10	20			120
	Dance & Culture		*			* = 70	10	40 Reflection	120
	Economics L100		60	35	10	15			120
	Psychology		45	40	10	25			120
	Sociology		45	40	10	25			120
	Applied Psychology and Sociology		45	40	10	25			120
	Politics		50			20	5 + 5	40 Essay	120
	Foreign language		30	10*** + 60	With ***	20			120
	Foreign language		15	10 + 25		10			60 (20 weeks)
FHMS	Biosciences (1 placement)		40	10 + 50		20			120
	Biosciences (2 placements)		30	30 + 30		30			120
	Chemistry BSc		3 x 5 + 25	15 + 40	10	3 x 5			120
	Chemistry MChem		2 x 2.5		15 + ** IndustD	2.5 + 7.5		** Poster	30 P credits
	Nutrition/Nutrition Food Science		40	10 + 50		20			120
	Dietetics								
	Nursing Studies								
FEPS	Computing		**	40		** 30 + 35		15 log	120
	Mathematics			40		30 + 35		15 log	120
	Electronic Engineering		65	15 + 25				15 log + paperw	120
	Physics		30	45	5	20			% of 120
	MMAE / ETITB		45	25 + 25	5	20			=10% Of degree
	Civil Engineering		45	25 + 25	5	20			=10% Of degree
FML	Management		20	60		10	20 46 weeks	10 PTO module	120
	Law (per placement)		30	10		10	10		60

This analysis would need to be produced at programme level, and would demand verification by programme leaders. The amount of time available within my Fellowship did not permit a comprehensive evaluation of every programme of study at this level, so it was agreed that 2 different subject areas would be selected within each Faculty. My aim was to draft an overview of my understanding of the learning outcomes for the P credits, and to interview the Senior Tutor for that subject in order to confirm my analysis and use it to track learning objectives across the 4-year programme. This would enable me to investigate the learning trajectories (Eraut 2004) experienced within various subjects.

Table 3 overleaf provides an example of this framework, that derived for Management programmes.

Data source 3: P credit learning outcomes by programme of study

An interview schedule was devised which used the learning outcomes framework as a starting point for discussion. A copy of this is attached at Annex C. Interviews would be semi-structured, recorded and fully transcribed.

Data source 4: interview with 8 Senior Tutors for PT

The 8 subject areas selected were chosen to provide a mix of disciplines. They were:

- FAHS: Music and Psychology
- FEPS: Engineering and Mathematics
- FHMS: Chemistry and Dietetics
- FML: Management and Law

Staff and student perspectives of the same issues would be investigated, so a parallel semi-structured interview schedule was prepared for students. A copy is attached at Annex D. Given the scale of this research, the sample of students interviewed from each subject would be between 5 and 10. The PTCC questionnaire for those who had been on placement in 2007/08 invited students willing to participate in further research to provide their name. I would use this information to identify potential interviewees.

Like the staff interview, those with students would be audio-recorded and fully transcribed.

Data source 5: individual interviews with 20-40 students

In sum, my research instruments were to be:

- longitudinal qualitative student feedback
- semi-structured interviews with Senior Tutors for PT
- semi-structured interviews with Students on placement in 2007/08
- P-credit analysis by subject area
- learning outcomes for PT, by subject area

Ethical approval for the research was sought and granted in August 2008.

PROGRAMME	MANAGEMENT	INTERVIEWEE	Dr Peter Alcott	DATE	11 November 2008
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PT = 10% degree weighting (4-year programme); 40% pass mark for PT

LEVEL 1/Scale	LEVEL 2/Scale	LEVEL P LEARNING OUTCOMES	WEIGHTING	ASSESSED BY	LEVEL 3/Scale
	Orientation programme			75% attendance	
		Appearance	30%	3 Employer reports, performance and review	
		Punctuality			
		Reliability			
		Initiative/proactivity			
		Role-specific knowledge/skills			
		Communication skills			
		Interpersonal skills	10%	Visiting tutor assessments at each visit	
		Customer skills and interaction			
		Management potential			
		Decision-making			
		Attitudes			
		Overall performance Strengths and aptitudes Specific weaknesses or challenges			
		Executive summary – 500 words] Placement overview – 500 words] 20% Presentation] Selection and use of information sources Analysis and evaluation of business activities40% Reflection on PT experiences and evaluation of PDP Self-awareness 40%	60%	Student written report 10,000 words	

Table 3 Example of Learning Outcomes framework for interview discussion

I had sought to capture the essence of my research in a poster, used as a point of discussion at the annual SCEPTRe Fellowship Fair 2008. This is reproduced in Figure 1.

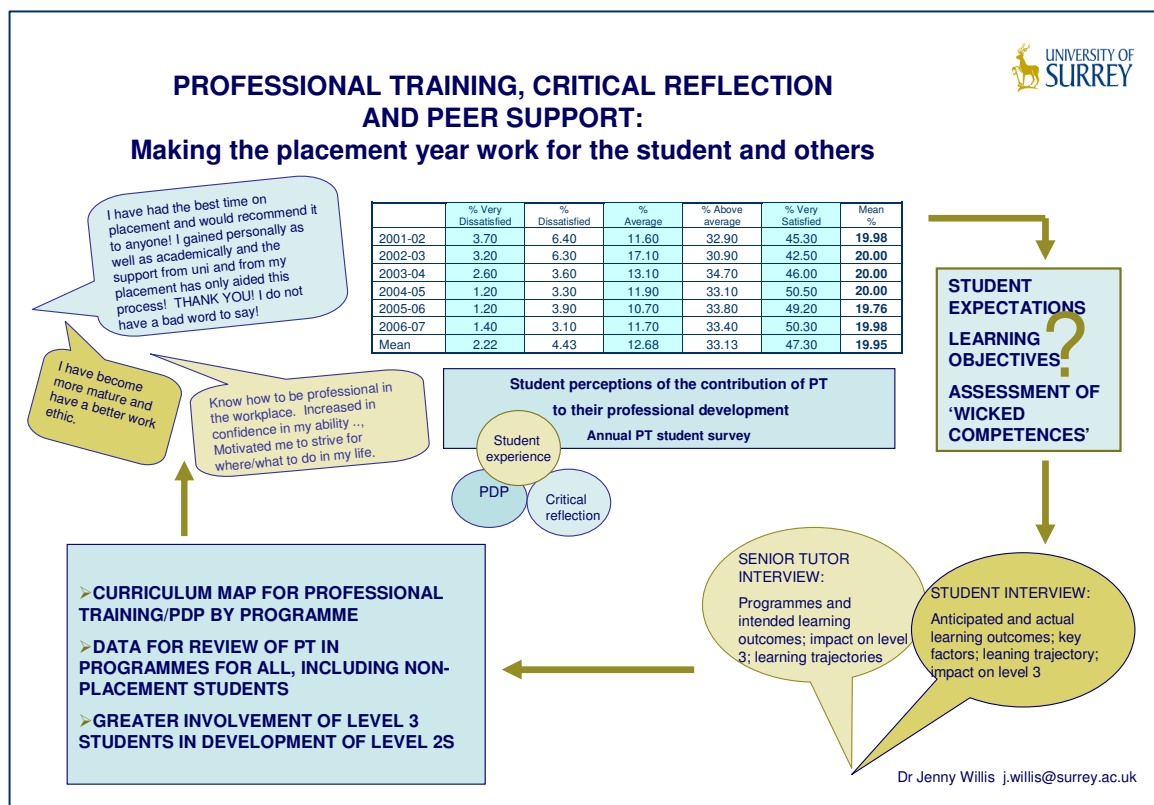


Figure 1 Conceptualisation of the research

Revised data sources

In making my application to the Ethics Committee, I had anticipated potential risks to this project, one of which was failure to engage sufficient participants. I was keenly aware of the many demands put on students to provide feedback for colleagues and feared that 'survey fatigue' might prove an obstacle. Sadly, despite selecting the timing of my request to avoid pressure points in their year, this proved to be the case: I sent some 50 personalised invitations to Level 3 students who had been on placement in 2007/08 and who had indicated their willingness to help in further research, but received only two responses. One came some months after the deadline, by which time I had been obliged to revise my data sources; the other student was invited to interview but failed to attend the arranged meeting.

I remained firmly committed to the need for qualitative research into the nature of the student experience and my desired outputs were clear, namely:

- to produce a Level P curriculum map for learning outcomes
- to provide a full report of my findings and recommendations
- to disseminate my work through articles for SCEPTRe and wider publication
- to contribute conference workshops on the research, at, e.g. WACE, Vancouver 2009

Accordingly, I reviewed the alternative means of acquiring the requisite data and realised that we did, already, hold a vast amount of information which had not been systematically explored to address the questions I was asking. Firstly, the qualitative data from the survey of placements 2007/08 could be examined from a new perspective. A second source lay in students' own narrative accounts of what being professional means to them. This was the theme of the SCEPTRe story-telling competition 2008, for which I had been a member of the assessment panel. Although each member of the panel had been required to assess only a portion of the entries, those that I had read had impressed me with their rich insight into student experiences. It now seemed an obvious route to draw on their first-hand accounts of the work they had been engaged in and how they perceived this to have influenced them. My research could thus remain qualitative, but I would, effectively, have cut out the interview stage, going directly to a transcript of their experiences. I sought and received confirmation that student approval had been obtained for such use of their data.

In choosing to work on the written data, I could not deny the issue of time. SCEPTRe Fellowships are part-time, hence unable to accommodate the sort of large-scale research I would incur if I retained my original interview instruments alongside these new data sources. To date, I had conducted two 2-hour staff interviews, each requiring some 6-8 hours for transcription. Reluctantly, I was forced to defer investigation of staff perspectives. I was able to obtain confirmation of the P-credit analysis without interviewing colleagues, but the tracking of learning outcomes across a subject area would have to await a future study. I would utilise the interviews with Senior Tutors that had taken place, but would not conduct any further interviews.

My report would still address the three questions noted on page 6 above, namely:

- Can we identify and draw benefit from the student PT experience in order to enhance the curriculum?
- What can we do at Level 3 to build on and extend the development of those who undertook a placement year?
- What can we do to enhance Level 3 for all students, including those who did not undertake a placement year?

The actual data sources utilised for reaching my conclusions would now be:

- qualitative student feedback for placements 2007/08 only (462 respondents)
- semi-structured interview data from two different Faculties
- P-credit analysis by subject area, verified by Senior Tutors for each subject
- learning outcomes for PT, by subject area
- students' written accounts of their PT experience (28 individuals), as submitted for 2008 SCEPTRe Storytelling competition, Learning to be Professional: the story of my placement.