

SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION (STSM) SCIENTIFIC REPORT

This report is submitted for approval by the STSM applicant to the STSM coordinator

Action number: CA15221

STSM title: Thematic analysis of focus group data in order to understand and map excellence in teaching, learning, research and writing at higher education.

STSM start and end date: 11/02/2019 – 25/02/2019

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PURPOSE OF THE STSM:

(max.200 words)

The aim of this Short-Term Scientific Mission (STSM) is to determine and communicate what comprises success and excellence at higher level education in regards to teaching, learning, research and writing, and in relation to their particular purposes, processes, knowledge, skills and values.

This STSM provides a latent thematic analysis of 6 focus group transcripts that involve the discussion of academic success and excellence in the related areas of teaching, learning, research and writing. The aim of this STSM is to derive qualitative data from these transcripts and supply this research data to the next phase of the Action. The primary scientific outcome of this STSM will be to create a comprehensive analysis which, when combined with interpretations of the quantitative data, will yield fresh insights towards the achievement of the Action's objectives. The primary objective was to provide a latent thematic analysis of the data, examining the assumptions and contexts behind the data, as well analysing the variety of ways the data intersects.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK CARRIED OUT DURING THE STSMS

(max.500 words)

The STSM began with a meeting with my host, Dr. Michelle Attard Tonna, at the Department of Education in the University of Malta. We discussed methods for coding the data and how I would collate these codes into categories and themes. The STSM then involved coding the six focus group transcripts. Following this, and a further meeting with my host, I began to condense and organise the codes into categories.

In the second week of the STSM I began writing the report for the thematic analysis. As a part of this I condensed the categories and codes into themes. There were three themes: (1) The Academic Personality, (2) Values and Purposes and Processes, and (3) Knowledge and Skills. These themes contained a number of sub-themes which were discussed individually, in relation to their theme and in relation to other themes and sub-themes. While the analysis invariably involved discussing the surface-level, semantic content of the focus groups, the STSM concentrated on the latent thematic content, specifically discussing the contexts, assumptions and social and cultural structures that related to the data. This involved critically examining the themes and sub-themes in terms of these contexts, assumptions and structures. In particular the analysis examined how the various themes and sub-themes connected together in both a constructive and deconstructive manner. I completed the thematic analysis report

providing an introduction, a key findings section and the analysis of the three major themes. I sent this report to my host at the end of the second week of the STSM.

I met with my host on 25th February, 2019. At our final meeting Dr. Attard Tonna reported that she was happy with the report and found it very insightful. She suggested no major revisions, only that I put the quotations from the focus groups in italics and include, in brackets, the name/number of the focus group that the quotations came from. She also suggested that I provide a table in the appendix outlining the codes, categories and themes. I agreed to all of these changes.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN RESULTS OBTAINED

The facilitators of the focus groups adopted a methodology which involved asking five key questions:

1. What has been the single most important factor that has contributed to your success as a researcher, writer, teacher and learner?
2. What have you found most difficult in your career to date and how have you managed that challenge?
3. What habits or what about your disposition contributes most to your success?
4. What do you want to do next and what (besides more time and resources) would help you to achieve that goal?
5. What advice would you give to an early career colleague hoping to succeed as a researcher, writer, teacher and learner?

Due to the open nature of these questions, the broad disciplinary backgrounds of the participants and the diversity of the focus groups, the raw data produced varied widely. Despite this, themes were identified, both in relation to the individual questions and across the range of the questions. Due to the similarity of the data produced in response to all the questions, I decided to code and analyze this data collectively.

Participants often reported similar values, processes, skills, knowledge and challenges across all of the focus groups and there was also much agreement between participants in individual focus groups. The often-fragmented nature of academic work practices aside, a comprehensive map of the experiences of academics and the components of academic success was possible, despite the diversity of the participants. However, the need to address key challenges was presented from the outset. The participants themselves struggled with the fragmented nature of their work and appeared to have little time to reflect on the holistic nature of their careers as academics. Further to this, the multifaceted nature of academic work demands an onerous level of adaptability and commitment. Participants reported having to adopt often contradictory personality traits that would require them to be introverted and extraverted, creative and rational, competitive and empathetic, reflective and single-minded, as well as being adaptable and assertive. The ideal personality of a successful academic formed a major theme in the focus groups and is discussed in relation to “the big five” personality traits. At this juncture, it is of interest to note that participants appear to be high in openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. The final trait is the only negative attribute that was reported consistently and seems to be a result of the diverse challenges that are part of an academic career.

The structure of academic institutions, rather than consistently providing participants with support, frequently created barriers and challenges that participants would spend a great degree of time circumventing and transcending. Due to the fragmented nature of their work, many candidates reported an inability to focus deeply on their research and the desire for more sabbatical time. Institutional and social factors formed a theme and overcoming challenges in these areas involved developing important skills. Some participants described diverse challenges that affected them throughout their career. In their early careers, some academics reported specific challenges that starkly contrasted with, though related to, later challenges. In regards to time management, for instance, early career academics found it difficult to manage their time as they had so much free time, while senior academics struggled with time management due to a lack of free time. Loneliness and isolation were also a feature from their experience as early career academics, while all participants highlighted the benefits of collaboration. Time management and the ability to collaborate were important factors in another major theme: processes, knowledge and skills.

While freedom was reported as a cherished commodity, this freedom may also entail being free from the rigidity that would be imposed by the expansion of further institutional integration and support. A further difficulty arose, specific to early career academics, where they may be too isolated from the institution or unaware of available supports to ask for the help they need. Communication within the institution, as a feature relevant to the importance of the social aspect of academic work, would be a pillar of an effective institutional model. As institutions evolve they must communicate such advances and changes, but they must also evolve in correspondence with advances occurring within disciplines by recognizing and valuing movements towards interdisciplinarity and innovation in research, teaching, learning and writing. Consequently, participants often spoke in agreement about the values and purposes of an ideal academic

which would also comprise those of their institutions. Values such as; being student centered, being respectful and helpful towards one's colleagues and fellow academics, as well as being committed to social justice, the dissemination of knowledge, equality, fairness and honesty, formed part of an ideal academic community. Values and purposes are the final major theme of this thematic analysis and reflect, as a collective ethos, a merging of the personal and institutional along with the intersection of knowledge and practice.

Key Findings

- Academic success is composite in nature and the most important attributes of a successful academic are adaptability and dynamism.
- A specific, ideal academic personality was reported that was open, conscientious, extraverted and agreeable.
- Candidates frequently reported neurotic responses to the stresses of academic life, which can be identified as the major challenge they face.
- The stresses of academic life were also composite in nature and reflect the dynamism and commitment required to succeed.
- Candidates identified the importance of institutional and social factors in their success, while also identifying how overcoming challenges in these areas help them develop important skills.
- The development of skills across the four areas was often reported as developing out of the participants' own initiatives, especially in the area of writing, highlighting the importance of the academic personality and, conversely, a lack of cohesive support throughout the various stages of an academic career.
- Candidates identified and agreed upon specific skills, such as time management and leadership, that were important for success.
- Candidates identified specific values and purposes, such as being student-centered and committed to social justice, that ultimately reflected both the values of an ideal academic and institution.

FUTURE COLLABORATIONS (if applicable)

My host and I discussed the importance and value of maintaining networks and continuing collaboration throughout the course of the Action. We also discussed the next phase of the project, which will involve analyzing quantitative and qualitative data in tandem. I would hope to be involved in this, perhaps as part of another STSM.

I am also interested in pursuing research in an area related to CA15221 which would instead involve examining academic failure, specifically in relation to PhD candidates. I plan on discussing this with members of the management committee for this Action.