From desk to a virtual world: SUPI Research Project Administrator case study

The role of SUPI Administrator has been identified as a key enabler for the Lancaster University partnership with Queen Elizabeth Teaching School. This case study reports on the changes in the role and responsibility of the SUPI Research Project Administrator post. It identifies what appear to be important characteristics of the post holders that have contributed to the success of the project and are recognised in proposals for mainstreaming SUPI activities and ensuring sustainability for research focused outreach activities that inspire the next generation of researchers.

Throughout the duration of the project there have been three post holders, each have undertaken their duties alongside other roles which have enabled them to continue their active involvement in research. The part time nature of the work appealed to Research Associates with part time posts; and in agreement with the SUPI Co-ordinator each has negotiated a flexible working pattern, which benefitted the project and individual administrator. For the project it was possible to have full time administrative support leading up to and on the day of key events. For the individual it was possible to maintain an active involvement in research in the locality which may not otherwise have been financially viable. In all phases of the project we have been very fortunate with our appointments, each bringing personal interests to the project which, over time and as a result of the co-creative approach adopted, has enabled them to shape the development of activities.

Figure 1: Evolution of the SUPI Research Project Administrator post

Phase 1: Administrative

Largely based in an office, the original focus of the role was in organising steering group meetings and liaising with University and School contacts to create the agenda, collecting contact details and establishing communication channels. Initial signs of the SUPI Research Project Administrator moving beyond a purely administrative function related to evaluation and training. They began to gather documentary evidence about research related activities within QES Teaching Alliance Schools that enabled the SUPI Research Project Administrator to contribute to the wider data collection for evaluating the project. They also investigated current and potential training opportunities for Early Career Researchers (ECR) an activity that has continued throughout the duration of the project. Aspects of the research involved administrative tasks such as costing, location, duration of training. However, as training for ECR was of personal interest, opportunities to be involved in arranging and planning training with NCCPE were welcomed.

Phase 2: Shaping development

From an administrative perspective the change during this phase was from establishing administrative systems to maintaining them and ensuring the administrative communicative duties were completed. It was during this phase when project activities started to be delivered and thus a key role and opportunity for the SUPI Research Project Administrator was on shaping the development and direction of the activities. The post holder at the time suggested that, "*the role requires someone with good communication and people skills, and with a social science research background i.e. used to working with research participants. Ideally someone with experience (or an*

understanding of the value) of Public Engagement who is prepared to work flexible hours to fit around the school timetable". It was during phase 2 that the post holder drawing on their own social science research experience was able to work alongside the project evaluator to capture observations of activities that could be used to inform development of the EPQ programme. The project benefitted from their involvement in and utilisation of research skills and the SUPI Research Project Administrator gained experience of applying skills in a different context and acquired insights into the administrative aspects of the project thus enhancing their CV.

Phase 3: Initiating new developments

It is clear that having an administrator with both an interest and experience of research has been valuable throughout each of the phases of the project. In this third phase, with project administrative and communication systems in place, and the success of the co-creation and action research approach regarding the EPQ activities, it has been possible for the SUPI Research Project Administrator to actively contribute to initiating new developments. Administratively as the project has become more established the communication and publicity needs have changed, this has involved the SUPI Research Project Administrator communicating with the university communications team and to write adverts and produce publicity flyers.

The new Research in a Box activity involves a larger network of university and school colleagues working together; the active involvement of the SUPI Research Project Administrator in the EPQ development meant they were well placed to complement the advice and support from the SUPI Co-ordinator. They have been able to *develop ideas with university applicants and then link applicants up with school contacts for co-creation of new boxes*. Not surprisingly they have reported that it is easier to support the development of boxes for the areas of Science and Technology, which relates to their own research. However, their experience and development work for the Art and Science day (see case study 2) has been providing them with insights into activities more suited to the Arts and Social Science. The creation of the shared calendar is another initiative in which the SUPI Research Project Administrator has helped to develop a resource that supports current planning and will facilitate longer term plans for continuation of what are becoming annual events, such as INSET, Science Poster competition.

What makes a good person for the role

Based on our experience and reflecting on the evolution of the role and our future plans to ensure SUPI activities are retained we believe the following characteristics are important:

- An understanding and experience of research and how research informed outreach activities are distinctive from more general outreach activities
- Excellent communication skills with experience of public engagement
- An appreciation of the school and university contexts, notably their annual cycles, systems for organising activities
- Ability to work with diverse range of colleagues across the university and in schools to champion the role of research within outreach activities.

As part of our sustainability plans we are exploring moving the post to the central UKSRO team to continue to develop and embed activities like EPQ, Research in a Box and Research poster competitions. A willingness to share ideas, and to engage in new approaches within the Lancaster context, as we continue to explore ways of working with rural schools that will include use of technology to inspire students virtually, is a far cry from work in an office.