

**The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research
Academic Fellowship Final Report**

**Academic Fellow: Dr Caroline Wright, University of Warwick
March 2009**

1 Project Title

Evaluating and Reinventing Sociology's Professional Skills Programme: Research Skills for First Years

2 Keywords

Sociology; research-led learning; transferable skills; reflexivity; first year undergraduates

3 Summary

The Department of Sociology at Warwick runs a Professional Skills Programme (PSP) which aims to introduce research skills for first-year undergraduates. This fellowship has evaluated the existing programme and its capacity to deliver both transferable, subject-specific and intellectual research skills, and student reflexivity about research skill acquisition. Students have been involved in the design and implementation of the evaluation, and generating ideas for reinventing the programme.

The aims and objectives of the project are as follows:

- to evaluate the existing Professional Skills Programme (PSP) in the Sociology department and its capacity to deliver: a) transferable, subject-specific and intellectual research skills; b) student reflexivity about research skill acquisition
- to consider the scope for reinventing PSP to promote student-centred and student-initiated research skill acquisition
- to involve students in the design and implementation of the evaluation and in generating ideas for reinventing the Professional Skills Programme, including renaming it.

All the milestones and targets for the project have been achieved, with the principal activities and outputs being as follows:

- dissemination and analysis of 105 questionnaires across the first year cohort
- non-participant observation of four PSP seminars
- three focus groups with first years to discuss PSP and student research skills

- identification of best practice across the University and in other Sociology departments nationally
- interviews with five seminar tutors who deliver PSP

The main conclusions of the project are as follows:

- PSP in its current form is used only selectively by the majority of students and only half of them associate it with transferable research skills
- Students generally want the programme to continue – half find it helpful and 60% relevant to their studies
- 77% of students want changes to the programme
- PSP is not fostering independent learning or research-led learning as much as it might
- Tutors are adopting a flexible approach to the programme that students appreciate but find the current format challenging to deliver and have some good ideas about how to facilitate research-led learning
- If in the short-term the programme is to remain non credit-bearing then it should be reduced to one term and reinvigorated through student led activities
- In the longer term the programme should be fully embedded in a first year module and contribute credit to it, with the emphasis on experiential learning and a group research project as a vehicle for the development of transferable, subject-specific and intellectual skills.

4 Activities

4.1 Project Context

Transferable skills have been highlighted features of the higher education curriculum since the late 1990s, amidst concern with graduate employability (CVCP, 1998). The Sociology department at the University of Warwick has a long-standing Professional Skills Programme (PSP) which develops first year students' transferable skills, alongside subject-specific and intellectual skills. The programme is delivered through a practitioner-defined workbook and programme of seminars attached to the first year core module, Sociological Imagination and Investigation (SII). As such it lies somewhere between the 'bolt-on' curriculum and the 'embedded' programme, as described by Robley et al (2005, p. 222). It covers the following skills: collaborative learning; note-taking; finding resources in the library; referencing, quoting and citing; information management; essay planning; communication and group work; finding resources in the electronic library; academic writing; avoiding plagiarism; career planning. Earlier version of the workbook also included sections on time management; interpersonal skills and Refworks; the first two were removed following very negative student feedback and the latter

when the University suddenly withdrew new access to Refworks software. The workbook contains activities and exercises relating to each topic that should be completed by students on a self-directed basis, and then there is a notional 30 minutes of seminar time for follow-up and discussion. The programme has been conceived to promote active and reflexive learning and to develop 'life skills' that will be invaluable throughout University and beyond it.

According to Burke et al (2005), there is a dearth of information about student perceptions of transferable skill acquisition, and this would certainly apply to PSP at a formal level. Informally, there is some evidence that students value parts of the programme more than others and that in general they lack investment in its aims, objectives and mode of delivery. In this context, the first aim of this research project is to evaluate student's skills acquisition and perceptions of their skills acquisition via the existing PSP provision.

Within the last 5 years the department of Sociology has initiated a number of projects that seek to a) increase student ownership of the teaching and learning process; b) promote inquiry-based learning; and c) build student's capacity to generate knowledge as researchers. These developments resonate with educational research advocating a more student-centred and student-directed pedagogy (Biggs, 1999; Levin and Greenwood, 2001). While it is clear that the current PSP contributes to students' research capacity, for example in developing skills of literature searching and referencing, it does not reflect more contemporary pedagogic concerns about offering curriculum space to students or promoting them as knowledge producers rather than consumers. Thus the second aim of this project is to consider the scope for redesigning PSP to a) privilege student's investments in it and ownership of it and b) foster student's research capacity and subject-position as researchers. Such an approach to pedagogy makes obvious the third aim of the project, which is to involve students directly in the design of the PSP evaluation as well as in the generation of ideas for its 'reinvention'.

During the project the Sociology department undertook a curriculum review and began considering a restructuring of the first year programme, a process that has since been accelerated following the Strategic Department Review in January 2009. This presents the ideal climate for dissemination, discussion and implementation of the recommendations of this project, as part of wider changes.

4.2 Phase 1

The project was originally to begin in April 2007, but a subsequent request from the PI to postpone the start date to October 2007 was agreed by the Reinvention Centre.

The first phase of the project saw the establishment of a Student Steering Group (SSG), following a presentation to the undergraduate Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) seeking volunteers. It was agreed that phase one would concentrate on research with students, starting with questionnaires distributed to all first years towards the end of the Autumn term. The SSG helped to shape the process of research throughout, commenting on the draft questionnaire, providing insights into securing a high response rate from their peers,¹ reviewing the completed questionnaires before analysis began and being part of the decision to use SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Ruth Morton, a research student in Sociology, was contracted to enter and analyse the data and to present the findings to the SSG

¹ 105 questionnaires were returned from a possible sample of about 150, with the non-response rate comprising those who were absent from their SII seminar that particular week.

thereafter. In doing so, Ruth also explained the process of analysis she had used and we discussed the merits of SPSS and quantitative vs. qualitative data. Feedback from the SSG was very positive in terms of having contributed to the design, implementation and analysis of this element of the project. The next stage of the project involved non-participant observation of four different SII seminars, an element of the research design proposed by the SSG, to see at first hand how PSP is delivered. Thereafter three focus group discussions were arranged to give first year students further opportunity to share their experiences of PSP and their ideas for the future, as well as to pursue in more detail some of the issues raised by the questionnaire analysis.

4.3 Phase 2

The second phase of the project began by identifying how other departments in the University address the issues of research skills for first years. The focus was on Politics and International Studies (PAIS), History and the Law School, the departments with which Sociology offers a joint degree. Thereafter, the top 4 Sociology departments in the UK according to the *Good University Guide 2009* (beyond Warwick) were considered, to see whether and how student research skills are embedded in the curriculum. The final element of this multi-method approach comprised interviews with five PSP tutors, in order to access their perspectives on the current programme and their ideas for its reinvention. Before the interviews the main conclusions from the first phase of the project were shared with the tutors, and they were invited to reflect upon them. Other activity in this second phase included participation of the PI in a Student Development Forum meeting chaired by Sean Russell, head of the Centre for Student Development and Enterprise, to discuss the future development of the Warwick Skills certificate. The SSG did not meet during phase 2 but were kept in touch with the project via e-mail. Plans to convene an SSG meeting and to contribute to an SSLC meeting to share the overall findings and recommendations for 'reinvention' of PSP were postponed until the Summer term 2009, given uncertainty about whether any changes to PSP would be part of a wider process of redevelopment that would be coming in at an accelerated rate.

5 Outcomes

The outcomes are reported below in relation to the original six research questions.

5.1 How effective is PSP in developing students' transferable, subject-specific and intellectual research skills?

- *Not as effective as it could be* – over 50% of students see large parts or all of the programme in a negative light. The most common reasons given are material at too low a level; general dislike; negative associations with SII; repetition of existing knowledge). Seminar tutors also highlighted a number of challenges to the effectiveness of PSP: its relationship to SII (see below); lack of access to a networked computer in the seminar rooms; limited scope for interactivity; lack of student ownership and investment in the programme due in part to it not being credit-bearing.
- *More effective at developing skills in academic referencing* – 37% of students rated this component the highest. Tutors also highlighted this aspect: 'I think the most successful areas

are referencing and citation, writing skills and library skills' (Tutor 3); 'I think on the whole the referencing is the most successful part of PSP...' (Tutor 4); 'They all think the referencing is worthwhile and they can see the relevance of covering plagiarism...' (Tutor 2).

- *Partly effective at developing skills in academic writing* – 16% of students rated this component the highest. Some tutors singled out this aspect and also suggested new activities to make it more effective, eg. 'I think it would help to show them good and bad examples of previous essays... with the aim being to correct them collectively in class' (Tutor 1); 'One thing I had thought of doing... is showing class essays with no names on to show good and bad examples.' (Tutor 2).
- *Effective in terms of clarity* - 87% of students consider the PSP handbook to be mostly or very clear in terms of instructions and guidance, and this opinion was shared by the tutors. Indeed there was a sense that it's so clear there's no need to go over it in class: 'If you go through the books some of it is quite self-explanatory and you don't want to make them sit there and do something in class because that's condescending and patronising' (Tutor 2).
- *Less effective in terms of generating overall student effort* - no students report investing a lot of time and effort, 33% report investing some, 60% not very much and the remainder none. 41% who commented on their effort report putting more effort in where they felt it to be beneficial, such as skills relating to class essays. There is a moderately positive association between students' investment and how useful they found PSP. Tutors also assess the input levels of most students outside the seminar as low: 'Honestly? I wouldn't say they even look at it. Some bring workbooks; some don't, although they did bring workbooks in the first term' (Tutor 3); 'I think students do the minimum, next to nothing, outside of classes' (Tutor 4); 'I doubt it... Even on the referencing exercise, not one brought that with them. But no, they don't put their backs into it' (Tutor 5). Seminar observations suggest that the degree of investment varies between groups: the percentage of students who had completed the PSP exercise in advance and brought it with them to the seminar ranged from 20% to 70%.²
- *Effectiveness is hampered by the link with SII* – while 61% of students think PSP should remain linked to SII, seminar observations and interviews with tutors highlight the following concerns:
 - Where students dislike SII for whatever reason PSP suffers 'guilt by association'.
 - SII seminar discussion is being subsidized by time originally allocated for PSP: most tutors only devote 10-15 minutes to PSP, always at the end of the seminar. 'For many the content of SII is the first time they will have acquired this level of theory/knowledge and it's quite challenging, and of course you just don't get the time. It would be difficult if SII was only 50 minutes [the seminar]. You're right that PSP is subsidising SII' (Tutor 4).
 - Students finding SII a challenge report not having enough time to do PSP as well: 'I suppose they put it in context, how many have done the reading each week for their seminar?' (Tutor 5).

² The students knew in advance that the seminar was to be observed, which could have skewed their investment.

- Coming at the end of a 90 minute seminar, students are tired: ‘Especially if it is at the end, some people have already started to pack up!’ (Tutor 4).
- Where students perceive a direct link between PSP and their progress on SII they are more motivated but where the skills are seen as more ‘generic’ they are less interested
- Disjuncture between SII and PSP may be acute: ‘It’s a dichotomy; they go from high theory in SII to the very mundane, monotonous tasks in PSP...’ (Tutor 4).

5.2 What are students’ perceptions of the knowledge and skills acquired through PSP?

- *Almost half find it helpful* - 4% of students find PSP very helpful; 43% mostly helpful, 49% not very helpful and 5% not helpful at all.³
- *60% of students find the knowledge and skills relevant to their academic modules*, particularly in terms of academic referencing and writing.
- *Almost half consider them transferable* - 47% of students consider the knowledge and skills developed through PSP to be very or mostly transferable.⁴
- *Referencing and essay writing are the most valued knowledge and skills*: referencing, 45%; structuring essays, 18%; seminar methods, 9%; library use, 6%; clarity of material, 6%.
- *Students consider the knowledge and skills to be at too low a level*, this being the least valued aspect: low level of material, 19%; everything, 19%; repetition of existing knowledge, 13%; note-taking, 6%; order of the programme, 4%; library use, 4%. Combining low level of material and repetition of existing knowledge, this is the least preferred aspect for about one-third of students, 32% .
- *Students generally value their seminar tutors’ flexible and enthusiastic approach to PSP*, placing greatest emphasis on those aspects that students perceive to be most useful. Seminar observation and interviews confirmed flexible tutor approaches: ‘I would have to be honest and say I’ve given in to them on this. I say “do you want to do this? It’s all useful to you”’ (Tutor 5).

5.3 What are staff perceptions of the knowledge and skills students acquire through PSP?

- *Some students achieve a lot* - ‘I think some “get it” and realise the importance of it’ (Tutor 3); ‘We’ve just got the assessed essays now and you can see some differences between those in the class’ (Tutor 2).
- *Students generally over-estimate their existing knowledge and skills* – ‘I can imagine things like “time-management” would be considered patronising. Time management is one of the most difficult things to get right, but is one of their poorest skills...’ (Tutor 2); ‘A lot of them say it’s too patronising but then don’t show the skills...Note-taking they really

³ Due to rounding the cumulative percent is over 100.

⁴ However, qualitative responses indicate that transferability was not always well understood or understood only narrowly in terms of transferability to other undergraduate modules.

dismissed as a waste of time, although I think note-taking is more difficult to get right than they assume' (Tutor 3).

- *Students generally invest in knowledge and skills they perceive as having an immediate return* - 'I think it is effective when the students need it, when they are approaching the essays or referencing, - that particular session is useful and effective because it is what they need' (Tutor 1).
- *Many students struggle to develop reflexivity*, not appreciating what it can contribute in the longer term to their learning - 'To be honest I don't think they are very reflexive about it, they want to get it right and so their questions are "If I reference in footnotes instead of the Harvard style will this affect my mark, or not"' (Tutor 1); 'Rather than really trying to be reflexive and develop themselves they like to ask you as much as they can for assurance. Particularly because they are first years and are going through a period of transition, I think they are very much used to being spoon-fed' (Tutor 2); 'I don't think they're reflexive because I don't think they care, all they want is a 2:1, as long as they get it, they're not bothered. They're pragmatic about it' (Tutor 3).
- *Levels of student reflexivity may increase over time* - 'As things progress and they acquire experience, for example how to tackle questions, then I think it's easier for them to become more reflexive in relation to the book [PSP workbook] and how it relates to their work improving' (Tutor 2).
- *More attention needs to be paid to developing students' critical skills* - 'The main problem I noticed with a lot of essays is, it is not the actual writing itself that is the problem; it was more the critical analysis in relation to the question' (Tutor 2).

5.4 What other routes do students identify as important for the acquisition and development of such skills?

- Further education before University
- Other seminar tutors
- Personal tutor
- Their other department (for joint degree students)
- No mention of University-wide provision, such as the Undergraduate Skills Programme

5.5 How do Social Studies departments elsewhere in the University promote transferable research skills for undergraduates?

The 3 departments which have joint degrees with Sociology were considered.

- In Politics and International Studies (PAIS) there is no equivalent to PSP. The undergraduate handbook provides detailed information on study resources; careers and postgraduate study; finding information in the library; plagiarism and cheating; referencing; and processes of reflection (PDP). Students are left to read and interpret this information for themselves and there is no formal group learning process, although students could

presumably ask personal tutors or seminar tutors for guidance. There is also a core module for single honours PAIS students, 'Introduction to Research Methods in Political Science', which delivers some skills associated with PSP in a formal group learning environment: presentational skills and enhanced capacity to use the internet for information-gathering purposes.

- In the Law School there is no equivalent to PSP. The guide for new students provides information on study guides; written work; careers; the library and study skills (the latter are listed but there is no information about developing the skills). The Law School's web-site has Basic guidelines for essay writing; Guide to writing dissertations and 40% essays and Essay writing skills, comprehensive resources covering the process of essay writing, including time management, finding resources, essay structure, doing analysis not just description, referencing and citation, as well as a document on cheating and a web-page on careers. One of the core first year modules, 'The Modern English Legal System', explicitly includes training in essay writing and solving problems as part of its remit.
- The Department of History⁵ has a programme with some similarities to PSP that is embedded in its first year double-weighted core module 'The Making of the Modern World'. During the module all full-time students participate in a group project (5-6 students) over a 5 week period, culminating in a presentation to their tutor and peers that is assessed by both. A mark is allocated to the group on the basis of tutor and peer feedback of the presentation and tutor marking of a log of activities that each group submits. This mark comprises 33% of the overall mark for the module, with the remainder split equally between a 1 hour examination and the best 2 of 3 assessed essays submitted. The group project is based on a research question chosen from a list provided by the tutor and is designed to develop skills of information gathering; critique and analysis; oral communication; working with others; time management; and intellect. A second element of the programme comprises Online Skills Training that focuses primarily on essay presentation, referencing and plagiarism. All students are required to do the training, which takes approximately 4 hours, and to undertake an online quiz to test their understanding. As many retakes as required to gain 100% in the quiz must be made.

5.6 How do Sociology departments elsewhere promote transferable research skills for undergraduates?

The *Good University Guide 2009* ranks UK Sociology departments as follows: Cambridge; Surrey; Warwick; Loughborough, Leeds.

At the University of Cambridge there is no equivalent to PSP. The undergraduate handbook contains guidance on plagiarism; libraries and other resources; and writing essays, and the web-page has a list of transferable skills and how they can be developed through the general degree activities of lectures, seminars and supervisions.

Sociology at the University of Surrey is distinctive in that it has a 10 credit core first year module 'ICT and Study Skills for Sociologists', which is assessed by 2 in-class timed assignments. The module develops skills of note-taking; reading and writing critically; essay writing; referencing; understanding

⁵ Not a social science department, but included because Sociology has a joint degree with History.

plagiarism; and a range of ICT skills (e-mail, word processing, spreadsheets, presentations software; finding and using electronic library and internet resources). The undergraduate degree handbook includes information on PDP, careers, plagiarism, assessment guidelines, essay planning, safety and ethics in fieldwork, copyright, library skills and there are personal tutor forms to promote reflexivity and dialogue. In year 2 there is an optional Group Research Project module, developing skills of research design; working as a group; and applying knowledge.

At the University of Loughborough there is no equivalent to PSP. The undergraduate handbook contains guidance on the library; essay writing; study skills (including reading, note-taking, lecture notes, organizing materials); referencing, citation, bibliography and footnotes; careers.

The University of Leeds is distinctive in that it has a credit-bearing core module for first years 'Study Skills for Social Science'. Unfortunately no further details could be obtained, and nor was the undergraduate handbook available online from outside the University.

5.7 How could PSP be redesigned to promote student's investments in it and ownership of it?

It is clear that redesign is warranted and would be welcomed by both students and tutors. 77% of students wanted some form of change to the programme and tutors were unanimous in their view that it was a challenge to teach in its current form, partly because of student disinterest.

Self-study only?

The focus groups considered having no taught programme at all but continuing to make information available via the student handbook, web-site etc. This is the model used in PAIS and the Law School, and at the Universities of Cambridge and Loughborough. The advantage is considerable saving in staff costs and well as greater flexibility for students in that they can proceed at their own pace. One disadvantage is that students would miss out on the group learning process: 'I think an important factor in the learning process of PSP is sharing – sharing experiences, problems and results' (Tutor 1). Further, some may still not invest in the programme because of the gap between students' perceived ability and actual ability and students' underdeveloped reflexive skills: '...if it [PSP] does just become a self-resource guide I think it will take them longer to acquire basic skills. I don't think they'd start looking at it themselves until much later on' (Tutor 2). Finally other first year seminar tutors would be likely to have to spend more time teaching referencing, library search skills etc.

Optionality?

55% of students favoured making the taught element of PSP optional in the questionnaire, with the idea that if students opted in they be more likely to invest time in the programme. However, later focus groups discussions generally discounted this idea on the grounds that, given competing demands on their time, students would generally not participate and would thus miss out on developing key research skills. Interviews with tutors indicate that first year students understandably focus on the immediate and are not in the best position to appreciate how developing their research skills will pay off in the future, both in terms of their progress and in terms of future employment prospects. There would also be planning problems as the number of students on the programme would not be known in advance.

Credit-bearing?

30% of students supported making PSP credit-bearing, on the grounds that they would invest in it more if it was part of their end of year marks. Tutors were also supportive of this: 'The idea to make the course accredited. I was all for that' (Tutor 3); '... if they don't follow PSP, nothing happens' (Tutor 1). However, 64% of students were explicitly opposed to making it credit-bearing. Nonetheless, this model is used with apparent success in the History department and at the Universities of Surrey and Leeds, and merits consideration.

Link to SII?

There are pros and cons of the current link with SII. It makes planning, timetabling and tutor provision easier and where the 'payoffs' are obvious to students, eg. material on referencing and essay planning, then the delivery is enhanced. Moreover, the 90 minute seminar is facilitating sustained discussion of the SII theory that students find challenging in term 1. At the same time, PSP has become SII's 'poor relation' in terms of student and tutor input, given the dynamics outlined above. Of the students, 31% supported separating the delivery from SII and 62% were opposed. The focus groups supported concentrating the delivery of PSP into term 1, alongside SII, with the workbook continuing as a resource in term 2 but no direct seminar activities, the seminar thereby reverting to the usual 1 hour (50 minutes effectively). There was also considerable support for this model among tutors: 'I have always thought "why not reduce it to one term"?... Condensing it to one term would mean only focusing on key aspects such as referencing, academic writing, plagiarism, essay planning and using the library' (Tutor 3); 'we probably should go for option 2, at least this way they get a term of it taught' (Tutor 5).

Workbook/Resources?

Focus group discussion clarified that the programme workbook is invaluable as a point of reference and should continue to be provided. Further a physical workbook was much preferred over an online only version. Some attention should be paid to raising the level of the activities, whilst at the same time acknowledging that student perception that it is all too easy is not generally borne out in practice. If the programme is to remain linked to SII then it is important to enhance the links between the two. Greater use could also be made of existing guides and online tutorials:

The Royal Literary Fund's writing guides for undergraduates:
<http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/he/tutorial/sociologist>

Intute's Virtual Training Suite for Sociologists: <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/he/tutorial/sociologist>
The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

Apostrophe Protection Society: <http://www.apostrophe.org.uk/>

Tutors?

The seminar observation confirmed that a proactive approach to PSP from tutors elicits more investment from students. For example, one tutor had taken over a group in term 2 that had hardly done any PSP work and successfully generated a seminar that always did some PSP work, where 60% of the students brought their workbooks to every class and were expected to have done some work in advance. While students may value tutors 'negotiating' with them about how much work they do on PSP, this does send an odd message as such negotiation about quantity of work doesn't take place in other curriculum areas. Consideration should be given to the training needs of tutors in terms of SII delivery, not least since more than half of them in any one year are generally sessional teachers: '... when you're doing your own work you are using these kinds of skills; yet to actually discursively articulate these skills to others

is quite difficult and you haven't really had any training for this, it's not like your specialism is education itself' (Tutor 2).

5.8 How could PSP be redesigned to foster student's research capacity and subject-position as researchers?

A balance needs to be struck between providing baseline information/guidance and fostering experiential learning, whereby students learn through doing and from one another. In terms of the current programme, the interviews and focus groups have elicited the following suggestions to enhance students' research-led learning:

- *Essay Writing 1*
Group discussion and presentation on qualities of good essays in Sociology, supported by written guidance in PSP workbook. Followed by practical exercise correcting 3 essays in the seminar, chosen strategically to illustrate positive and negative qualities. Follow-up practical 'marking' of one another's actual essays, as long as sufficient trust between students had been fostered.
- *Essay Writing 2*
Group discussion and presentation on unpacking essay and exam questions, supported by written guidance in PSP workbook. Followed by practical exercise unpacking questions in the seminar and using them to generate a potential essay structure.
- *Exam Preparation*
Group discussion and presentation on revision and examination skills, supported by written guidance in PSP workbook. Followed by timed practical exercise in the seminar to practice handwriting at speed; working with key concepts; structuring an answer.
- *Finding Library Resources* (requires access to networked computer with projector)
Individuals demonstrate how they access core readings via the Library; how they do a literature search using the Library catalogue; how they access electronic journal articles; how they recall borrowed items. Strategies shared about accessing readings at peak demand, eg. using the Learning Grid; targeting journal articles; finding alternative sources on the shelves with similar classmarks and making judgments about their suitability. Could be combined with a seminar group visit to the Library.
- *Referencing and Citation*
Use a quiz in the seminar to practice skills, identify misunderstandings and clarify purposes of referencing and citation. (The PI has devised such a quiz based on errors identified when class essay marking and tutors could customize it for their groups). The students could work individually and also in groups to pool ideas.

In the longer term, a credit-bearing student led research project at the heart of the programme, as in History, would further enhance students' subject-position as researchers and stimulate their investment because it 'counts'.

A free-standing research skills module could also be considered, drawing on the models at Surrey and Leeds. Careful consideration would need to be given to the amount of credit, and it may necessitate another 'half' module (15 CATS each) or two other 'one third' modules (10 CATS each) to complement it. This approach would also be resource intensive.

6 Implications

It is clear that the delivery of transferable skills in Sociology, through PSP, is ready for a re-think. The current programme is not advantaged by lying between the 'bolt-on' curriculum and the 'embedded' programme (Robley et al, 2005, p. 222). Bolting-on to SII without bearing credit is a disincentive to student investment and tends to marginalize the programme, while the embeddedness in SII is insufficient not to cause disjuncture. Moreover, the current programme is not sufficiently promoting active and reflexive learning. First, students generally over-estimate their existing skills. This generates a paradox whereby students find the level of the programme too basic, patronizing even, while their tutors generally find their acquisition of programme skills wanting. Second, PSP is not getting the message across about the value of reflexivity as an investment in long-term achievement, and the activities designed to promote reflexivity are ineffective in that they are the least valued aspects of the programme.

The survey of partner departments at Warwick and other highly rated Sociology departments in the UK suggests 3 basic models for delivery of research skills to first years:

- Literature based self-study model (PAIS; Law School; Cambridge; Loughborough)
- Curriculum embedded model a) integration within existing module (History)
- Curriculum embedded model b) free-standing credit-bearing module (Surrey; Leeds)

Current PSP provision is of the second type. The following recommendations are made for the 'reinvention' of PSP.

- In the short-term, retain the link between PSP and the SII seminar but reduce the seminar-based element to one term, as outlined above. Direct links to SII should be promoted alongside experiential learning. Resources should be provided to promote self-directed activities in term 2, such as the Undergraduate Skills Programme. Renaming to emphasise research skills and transferable skills would be appropriate.
- In the longer term, the programme should remain connected to a first year module (not necessarily SII), be fully embedded in that module and contribute credit to it, through a group research project, for example. This has the advantage of promoting learning through research as well as fostering student investment because it 'counts'. In this case renaming would be appropriate to emphasise the students as producers of knowledge.
- The idea of a free-standing module could be considered, as at Surrey and Leeds, but is not recommended here. It would be very resource intensive and there are now substantial opportunities at University level to gain certification through The Undergraduate Skills Programme.

This report will be made available to all Sociology staff and tabled for presentation and discussion at the next meeting of the departmental Undergraduate Committee in the Summer term 2009. A summary will also be discussed with the SSLC, once it is clear whether the wider changes to the first year curriculum that are under consideration are to be fast-tracked.

7 Resources

The current PSP Workbook is available online:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/undergrad/current/progsandmods/psp>

Further details about this project, including the chronology of activities and project data, are available here:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/academicstaff/wrightc/home/research/reinvention>

8 References

Biggs, John (2003) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*, Buckingham: Open University Press

Burke, Veronica, Ian Jones and Mike Doherty (2005) 'Analysing student perceptions of transferable skills via undergraduate degree programmes', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 132-144

CVCP (1998) *Skills Development in Higher Education*, London: CVCP

Durkin, Kathy and Andrew Main (2002) 'Discipline-based study skills support for first-year undergraduate students', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 24-39

Levin, Morten and Davydd Greenwood (2001) 'Pragmatic Action Research and the Struggle to Transform Universities into Learning Communities' in Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (Eds) *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, London: Sage, pp. 103-113

Robley, Will, Sue Whittle and Deborah Murdoch-Eaton (2005) 'Mapping Generic Skills Curricula: A Recommended Methodology', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 221-231

9 Acknowledgements

With thanks to all the undergraduate students who participated in this project, especially Sana Ahmad, Suraiya Hawa and Natalie Sahunta for their contributions to the SSG. Thanks also to the seminar tutors in Sociology for their full cooperation with all stages of the research, including agreeing to be interviewed. Three doctoral students in the department of Sociology offered excellent service as research assistants at particular points during the project, Maud Perrier; Ruth Morton and Kirsty Liddiard, and their contributions are much appreciated.

10 Contact Details

Dr Caroline Wright
Department of Sociology
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL

e-mail: c.wright@warwick.ac.uk