

BAICE Sponsored Dissertation Writing Workshop Report

Rationale

The universities of Bristol and Birmingham both have thriving Masters programmes that draw upon international and comparative education. In both settings, students also focus on studies relating to educational leadership, management, policy and practice in an international context.

Students following these courses at both universities come to the UK from a wide range of countries, but rarely have opportunities to interact academically with others studying in the same field and at other universities. This BAICE one day workshop was designed to bridge this gap and facilitate supportive and helpful contacts between students and staff.

Focus, timing and organisation

The focus for the day workshop was on the planning and development of Masters dissertations. The event took place on Tuesday 10th June 2008, during a period in which students were working on their research. University staff, from both Birmingham and Bristol, provided guidance about the processes involved in writing a dissertation, and students had the opportunity to present and discuss their emergent dissertation plans. Small and whole group discussions featured throughout the day.

Objectives

The day aimed to help participants to:

- learn more about BACIE and its role in promoting comparative and international education;
- interact with others from their own country or region, and elsewhere, who have common academic and professional interests;
- establish networks for developing their interests when they return home;
- develop their Masters dissertation plans in the light of workshop experience;
- extend the possibilities for their dissertation, e.g. conducting fieldwork, using libraries and data sources;
- broaden their sphere of critical discussion;
- learn more about related organisations e.g. DfID, UNESCO, the British Council;
- be better informed about the range of universities interested in international and comparative education, which may be relevant for their own further work or for advising friends about UK possibilities.

For the academic staff, the workshop was seen as an opportunity to:

- share good practice;
- plan for possible additional links and activities;
- consider future potential for including other universities;
- introduce postgraduate students to BAICE, its activities and the journal Compare.

The venue

The event was hosted by the Research Centre for International and Comparative Studies (ICS) at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol. ICS work builds upon a long tradition of international and comparative research carried out by the GSoE. It is committed to multi-level studies of the global and local factors that contribute to education in different contexts. The event took place in the fourth floor conference suite where over 60 delegates met throughout the day. A poster display profiling a sample of dissertations was also presented in an adjoining room, where a BAICE display and BAICE membership table were also located.

The participants

The majority of participants were post-graduate students on Masters programmes at the Universities of Bristol and Birmingham. Most were studying on pathways with an international and comparative focus, but some also came from psychology of education and counselling pathways. A number of PhD and doctoral students attended the event to share their experience and support the Masters students. Approximately 20 countries were represented in total, with delegates attending from Asia, Africa, Europe, North and South America and the Caribbean.

Staff from both research centres were on hand throughout the day, to answer questions and offer advice and points for consideration. The staff delegates included: Professor Michael Crossley, Dr Angeline Barrett, Dr Gabrielle Hogan-Brun and Dr Elizabeth McNess from the University of Bristol; and Dr Chris Williams, Dr Michele Schweisfurth and Professor Clive Harber from the University of Birmingham. Professor David Stephens of the University of Brighton also attended and made valuable contributions to discussions.

The order of the day

Please refer to the attached programme for more details.

The day was split into half hour sessions (with two coffee breaks and an hour for lunch) to allow time for a wide variety of presentations and discussions, as well as for networking during the breaks. Delegates were welcomed by the University of Bristol's MEd Programme Directors, Dr Elizabeth McNess and Dr Sara Meadows, who saw the event as, "An opportunity to let intellectual sparks fly with each other."

i)The dissertation process – staff Input

During the first session, Professor Michael Crossley presented a framework for writing dissertations, which took participants through a helpful process for planning a research proposal, step-by-step. This also demonstrated how a plan could be turned into chapters for a full dissertation. Dr Chris Williams followed with some 'handy hints' for approaching dissertations, focusing on ways to think critically and creatively about the planning and presentation of research.

ii)Student presentations

The majority of the day was then dedicated to student presentations of their work in progress. These sessions were comprised of 15 minute speaker presentations, followed by 15 minutes of question and discussion time. These sessions provided a forum for speakers to gain advice, receive guidance and gather ideas for addressing research issues. Presentations generated questions and discussion from the audience that related to many key issues that are faced by comparative and international researchers in the field of education. Sessions were chaired by students from Bristol and Birmingham.

Student presenters represented the two universities and came from five different nations. The five presentations covered a wide range of topics, from a comparative study of science education in England and Botswana, to education reform in the small state of Armenia. Other countries of focus included China (mainland and Hong Kong), Kenya, and The Gambia. Planned research projects covered qualitative approaches, using a range of data collection methods, as well as the use of quantitative questionnaires and statistical analysis. The professional backgrounds of the presenters were diverse, ranging from subject teachers (science and language), to a primary head teacher, an inclusion specialist and an educational administrator. The cultural and professional diversity of the presenters exemplified the strengths of international and comparative education in sharing diverse forms of knowledge, skills and experiences.

Other students were encouraged to create poster presentations about their dissertations. These were displayed throughout the day and, as well as contributing to the general discussion, enabled presenters to gain feedback on their ideas.

iii) Small group discussions

The final part of the day was given to reflective discussions in small groups. Delegates were allocated to one of five small groups to discuss their 'key reflections on the day'. Participants were asked to highlight key points and issues that had attracted their attention throughout the workshop. A spokesperson from each group fed back the key points to the whole group in a concluding panel chaired by Professor Clive Harber (see "Outcomes" below).

iv) Networking opportunities

There were several breaks during the day to give participants the opportunity to talk to each other, share ideas and continue discussions from the sessions. A networking activity resulting in a prize draw, encouraged students to find other participants from both universities with a similar research focus, methodology, and area of interest to themselves. Participants were also given the opportunity to mark their country of birth on a world map to highlight the diversity of the group. An evening social event and planned tour of Bristol allowed for further social interaction between the two groups of students.

Much information about BAICE and other universities and organisations involved in international and comparative education was available on the day. Students also had an opportunity to become members of BAICE.

Outcomes

In the review of the day, participants remarked on the importance of and their appreciation for:

- the diversity of students and the variety of dissertation subjects;
- developing relationships with other universities;
- opportunities to assemble with peers from their programmes;
- the competence and expertise of university staff in the field of comparative and international education;
- maintaining an open mind when planning and conducting research;
- understanding the contexts and ethics of a culture before conducting international research;
- recognising the differences between method and methodology;
- acknowledging common experiences, problems and issues in research.

Ways forward

Participants thoroughly enjoyed this BAICE event and believe that this is a good way to support the growth of interest in both BAICE and the field of comparative and international education. Further events could also include attention to data analysis, discussions of validity and reliability in research and considerations of multidimensional ethical issues

The students and staff at both universities would like to extend their thanks to BAICE for their timely and helpful support for this event. This BAICE workshop provided an excellent information sharing and networking opportunity for all involved. It was a most innovative way to support students engaged in international and comparative studies during the dissertation writing experience. We hope to continue to build on the academic and professional links established through this event and hope that BAICE will continue to support this type of venture in the future.

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