



Report of COST Action 15221 Training Schools

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OVERVIEW

The COST mission is best illustrated by its own acronym, leading with the word ‘cooperation’ and followed by the words ‘science and technology’. This key concept is further reinforced by the nature of COST Actions which are defined as science and technology ‘networks’. The essence being that COST helps implement the idea of the European Research Area about the importance of sharing knowledge between researchers and innovators in order to strengthen Europe’s research capacities.

Important in-and-of themselves, networking opportunities within a COST Action are also designed to achieve the specific objectives determined in the Action Memorandum of Understanding. Since COST Actions are usually large networks, consisting of participants from numerous countries, a lot of cooperation and coordination is needed. The main Networking Tools within an Action are: meetings, workshops and conferences, Short Term Scientific Missions, ITC¹Conference Grants and Training Schools.

Training Schools can help researchers, especially early career investigators (ECIs), to develop new skills and knowledge, not least because ECI and PhD students are prioritized as trainees. Schools are not organized to provide general training, rather, as all other Networking Tools, Training Schools should have the Action objectives as their main focus. According to the COST Vademecum, Schools should last a minimum of 3 days and a country balance should be present for trainee participations.

There was a series of five Training Schools in the COST Action 15221 (unfortunately, the sixth Training School intended to take place in March 2020 was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic). To obtain immediate feedback on the Schools’ efficiency and value, participants were asked to answer a short questionnaire on the last day of their Training School. This report is a synthesis of all the responses recorded during the Training Schools. The report starts with an overview of the Training Schools COST Action 15221 (dates, venues, content taught, facilitators) and continues with the summarized responses divided into four sections (‘Most valuable aspects of the training schools’, ‘Training schools’ contribution to participants own research and work interests’, ‘Participants’ interest in broadening a specific content’, ‘Insights, reflections and comments from participants’).

The report ends with some concluding remarks.

INFORMATION ABOUT COST ACTION 15221 - WE RELATE TRAINING SCHOOLS

Within the COST Action 15221, five Training Schools (TS) were organized between December 2017 and September 2019, each lasting five days (see Table 1). The schools could be seen as bridges needed to move from one Action goal to another. In order to classify the current common ground for the support of teaching, learning, writing and research, a large amount of data had to be gathered using different methods. Therefore, TS 1 and TS 2 focused on qualitative research methodology while TS 3 on quantitative methodology. TS 4 and 5 dealt with the interpretative and dissemination stages of research in the social sciences. Examples of topics discussed included: TS 1 - data gathering tools, focus groups, surveys, interviews; TS 2 - questionnaires, collaborative thematic analysis of data; T3 - issues in questionnaire design, types of variables and basic descriptive statistics for examining questionnaire data, exploring relationships among variables.

School date, Venue, host	Facilitators	School participants & countries represented
December 2017 European University Viadrina Frankfurt Oder, Germany	Dr. Christopher Anson North Carolina State University Raleigh, North Carolina, USA Dr. Christiane Donahue Dartmouth College Hanover, New Hampshire, USA	Trainees: 14 Countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, UK
September 2018 European University of Tirana Tirana, Albania Host: Dr. Erika Melonashi	Dr. Jessie L. Moore Elon University Elon, North Carolina, USA Dr. Peter Musaeus Aarhus University Aarhus, Denmark	Trainees: 9 Countries Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, UK
January 2019 Goethe University Frankfurt an Main, Germany Host: Dr. Nora Hoffmann	Dr. Mauro Gasparini Turin Polytech Torino, Italy Mira Dobutowitsch Maynooth University Maynooth Ireland	Trainees: 11 Countries Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Italy, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Serbia
March 2019	Dr. Rachel Riedner	Trainees: 14 Countries

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University Skopje, North Macedonia Host: Dr. Mimosa Ristova	George Washington University Washington, DC, USA Dr. Shelagh Waddington Maynooth University Maynooth Ireland	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Italy, Montenegro, Morocco, Poland, Serbia
September 2019 Juraj Dobrila University of Pula Pula, Croatia Host: Dr. Gordana Dobravec	Helen Fallon Maynooth University Maynooth Ireland Dr. Carol Hayes George Washington University Washington, DC, USA	Trainees: 14 Countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Estonia, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Spain, UK
Total number of countries represented in training schools: 22		

Table 1: Summary of all COST Action 15221 - WeReLaTe Training schools

After various data needed for the Action was collected and analyzed, TS 4 was organized to help participants develop deeper analytical skills and strategies for synthesizing different data sets. Examples of topics discussed on TS 4: semantic data analysis, inductive data analysis, synthesizing ideas across a range of data sets and associated analyses, crafting the research narrative and articulating insights. The next goal was to publish the Action findings therefore TS 5 dealt with writing processes and strategies associated with publication. Examples of some topics discussed on TS 5: planning a publication strategy, peer reviewing, writing groups, reading circles, collaboration writing and co-authoring.

Finally, the cancelled TS 6 should have dealt with writing across genres. Even though it was regrettable not to be able to provide this final link of our planned networking activities, it was really reassuring to learn, from the participants' feedback, the amount of planned and added-value benefits the other five TSs brought.

THE MOST VALUABLE ASPECTS OF THE TRAINING SCHOOLS

As apparent in the participants' feedback, Training Schools have many valuable aspects. However, what is most valuable is their double use as an opportunity for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of trainees and as a tool towards achieving specific Action goals.

For individual trainees, TSs associated with CA 15221 have offered opportunities for expanding knowledge of social research methods, within the methodological spectrum used in education from qualitative (e.g. the focus group) to quantitative (e.g. the questionnaire and the survey). Given the often diverse background of trainees, having a whole series of one-week schools of intensive exposure to theory and practice of research design, data collection and analysis has proven invaluable for participants, who in most cases were either ECIs in need of expanding their methodological apparatus, or mid-career researchers and practitioners lacking time and opportunity for their own professional training.

For the latter group, TSs have represented a break from professional routine and a welcome study

period together with colleagues from all over Europe and beyond, and guided by experienced trainers. For both groups, TSs offered a unique opportunity for networking with colleagues from a variety of institutions and for establishing new synergies and cooperations even beyond the scope of the Action.

As a general remark, common to all TSs, participants expressed enthusiasm for working with colleagues from different disciplines and countries. In some cases, the TS experience brought about changes in the participants' attitudes and research approaches, as evident, for example, in the comments made about TS 5 in Pula on writing practices, where collaborative writing was considered both profitable and enjoyable, and TS 3 in Frankfurt am Main, where people felt they had become more autonomous with quantitative analysis.

In terms of specific Action goals, the TSs provided a place for dissemination about the Action purposes and topics to those not already involved and a venue for reflecting and working on some of the Action research questions (e.g. tapping into researchers' needs in terms of Teaching & Learning, Writing & Research support by analysing responses to the survey).

HOW THE TRAINING SCHOOLS CONTRIBUTED TO PARTICIPANTS' OWN RESEARCH AND WORK INTERESTS

The value of TSs in contributing to the participants' own work is already evident in the premise above that TSs promote CPD and is also articulated further in the following section (What participants wanted to learn more about). In all TSs the unanimous comment concerned the expansion of theoretical and operational knowledge about research methodology and the consolidation of tools and approaches for conducting research in education and writing. This was particularly true for those involved in doctoral or postdoctoral research, as stated with reference to TS 4 in Skopje, and TS 1 in Frankfurt an der Oder, where participants stated that, after these particular TSs, they would be more confident in applying a mixed methodology, i.e. both quantitative and qualitative, in their research. With reference to TS 2 in Tirana, participants appreciated the multidisciplinary constitution of this group of trainees, commenting on how working together had provided them with 'new ways of seeing and researching'. In some instances, TSs also activated ideas for incorporating instruction on similar topics in graduate programmes which may not traditionally have had such elements, specifically on conducting qualitative research, thus triggering a virtuous educational cycle: 'I enjoy the kind of training I got as an already practicing teacher/ researcher, so when I go back home I will offer that in turn to the students at my institution, who are the practitioners of the future'. Similarly, participation in a TS was said to affect assessment practices (TS 1). In other cases, they helped with larger research projects carried out at the local institutions, as with analysing large quantities of data collected within a writing centre to advance writing research (TS 3). In general, getting together and being given a chance for supporting one another in their research was seen as a major contribution to one's own research and professional growth.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS WANTED TO LEARN MORE ABOUT

TS participants frequently wanted to expand their knowledge and to learn new skills. The TS topics varied but within this variety there were specific elements which participants honed in on as being beneficial. As noted previously, our TSs considered research design and methods and participants noted that they were interested in learning about particular approaches within quantitative and qualitative research methods. Many of them were also keen to learn more about our COST Action and COST Actions in general. In turn, participants were interested in aspects of the TSs that related to publishing and sharing one's work. In addition, some participants were actively seeking to cascade their learning and they were interested in knowing more about how they might teach certain topics covered in the TS when they returned to their own settings; they noted that the TS

participation would impact on their teaching and their research.

In some instances the learning was 'just in time' and participants had identified that the TS topics would help them to learn something they needed for their research e.g questionnaire design. The

learning they gained would have been enough for them to identify 'where to next' and to better understand what more they needed to know. Because of the TSs, participants were better able to articulate what more they wanted to learn; they could drill down into the topics a bit and be more targeted with regards to their next steps in their learning.

OTHER INSIGHTS, REFLECTIONS AND COMMENTS FROM PARTICIPANTS

When we provided the opportunity for participants to add other comments at the end of their evaluation forms a few themes emerged consistently.

Participants expressed gratitude to the hosts and the trainers for the experience of the TS; they often remarked on the venue as well. This is captured exceptionally in this comment about the hosts for the first training school where a strong connection was also made with the theme of the Action: 'I would like to thank all three contributors, Tiane, Chris and Katrin for all the amazing work they have done. I guess they represent what a great teacher, researcher, writer and learner is. We could have studied them and derived the model after all :)'. Participants appreciated not only what the trainers knew and shared, but also how they communicated their knowledge and expertise which modelled good practice in terms of teaching and learning.

In turn, participants frequently noted how much they enjoyed the experience of the TSs especially with regard to meeting and working with new people. They found the TSs motivating and insightful. They described how positive the group dynamics were, the cultural diversity of the groups, and the range of perspectives that were shared. They were pleasantly surprised at how successful this diversity could be: 'I wouldn't expect that people from so many countries and different fields would be able to cooperate so well'. They also liked that time was given to building relationships and that this was seen as important; they enjoyed exchanging experiences and stories.

Trainees also noted in the final comments that they appreciated the financial support provided by the COST Action which allowed them to attend the school. It was recorded that this support was a practical step to contributing 'more broadly to equality of opportunity across Europe especially for partners from ITCs and NNCs'. Many participants noted that they would welcome more opportunities to participate in TSs and that they would recommend the TSs to others. They noted that the TSs helped to address gaps in local training and development opportunities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Reflecting on the TSs, as Management Committee members of the CA 15221, it is very heartening to revisit how much the experience of participating in the TSs has meant to participants. There is a strong sense of the schools being collaborative learning hubs which, though clearly structured and organised, always allowed for starting where participants were and honoring the contributions and experiences that individuals brought to the school.

While we did not gather feedback from the trainers on the experience of facilitating the TSs, informally we have discussed the work with them. Trainers, though travelling to the TSs as experts, consistently remarked on how much they learned by visiting a different institution, in a different country and working with different colleagues. All of the trainers agreed to facilitate the TSs on a voluntary basis - no trainers are paid for this work that takes them in some cases 1000s of

miles from their homes. Neither is there any support for the training school preparation. Likewise, when presenting their short report about training schools at MC meetings, the TS hosts commented on how the TS organization and management process ran smoothly due to the participants' positive attitude.

The hosts and participants also often engaged in informal activities, like guided tours, which provided a great opportunity for learning about the culture of different countries. On the whole, the training schools turned out to be an enriching experience on many levels for everybody involved - participants, facilitators and hosts. The commitment from the hosts and the trainers is a wonderful enactment of the generosity that exists across the sector, and an excellent example for ECIs about the ideal character of academia.

Indeed, the TSs model epitomises elements of what is good of academia. TSs work because of the collegiality and tolerance of the participants, hosts and trainers. They rely on everyone remaining open- minded and curious, and engaged. They involve everyone proceeding in good faith and recognising the unique contributions of others. They offer an opportunity for those involved to learn not only about the TS topics, that new knowledge and those new skills, but also to learn about themselves and to learn about others. They are only possible because of the generosity of the hosts and the trainers all of whom go well beyond what is expected in terms of their commitment to the TS work. They are human experiences which are successful because of their tone of rigour, expertise and credibility, but equally because of their spirit of friendship, kindness and care.

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