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Practice Papers

Research and scholarship in a 'HE in FE' environment

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ABSTRACT

Academic staff working in higher education environments perform a wide variety of roles which are each integral to their professional identity. A fundamental constituent of this identity is the relative place and value of research and scholarship. The way in which such an identity transpires in a 'HE in FE' context is less understood, particularly in cases where academic responsibilities differ from the HE norm. This paper presents a study that details the perceptions and experiences of academic staff in a 'HE in FE' context in regards to their engagement in scholarly activity. Forty-four questionnaire respondents detailed both personal and institutional factors that contribute to the practical and philosophical challenges relating to the conduct of research. The value which is placed upon opportunities to engage in scholarly work often appeared unfulfilled; a range of barriers were described which ranged from workload related issues, issues of self-confidence and a perceived lack of institutional support. This study further emphasises the need to facilitate opportunities for research and scholarly activities within a growing segment of the HE marketplace.

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1. Introduction

Universities have multiple functions and countless agendas which contribute to their worth and place within society. [Boulton and Lucas \(2011\)](#) speak of the importance placed upon the "totality of the University enterprise", in mind of the multiple functions that such institutions play (p. 2516). The missions and tasks of individual Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) are thus innumerable, however, simplistically, they are often stated in mind of a range of teaching, scholarship, and community service obligations ([Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno 2008](#)). Dependent upon their individual historical and geographical contexts, the balance of these different commitments varies according to the combined motivations of institutions and individuals, as well as their traditions of strength.

In England, the development of mass higher education (HE) systems over the past half-century has followed paths of both expansion (the growth in student numbers at existing institutions and the emergence of new establishments) and incorporation (the enlargement of HE systems to subsume other tertiary level Further Education (FE) institutions) ([Scott, 2009](#)). Through this growth, HEI's have continued to be the site of a range of activities which are the products of Government policies relating to teaching and learning, widening participation, research, and internationalisation. Alongside teaching, administration and academic management, research and/or scholarship are commonly considered as factors which contribute to the academic practice of staff in HEI's ([Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall 2003](#)). Furthermore, in light of the growing 'publish or perish' culture, [Light, Cox and Calkins \(2009\)](#) highlight their perception that teaching has become "the

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poor relation to research and scholarship” (p. 26). Active engagement in research activities is what defines the work of the Higher Education sector, and what delineates it from Further Education.

To fulfil these multiple and expanding roles, alongside what is perceived by many to be the ‘core business’ of teaching, it is now a common expectation that academic staff engage in some form of ‘Research and Scholarly Activity’ (RASA) – many other localised acronyms exist to depict the same portion of time. There are a myriad of intentions behind this strand of work, including the motivation to further enhance our collective knowledge and understanding on a particular topic, as well as improving the profile of the HEI to whom academics are employed. In focussing on the UK context, the level of expectation in this regard is often dependent upon whether the academic is employed in a so called ‘Russell Group’ institution (traditionally large research intensive institutions), or a post-1992 ‘new’ or ‘modern’ University. Irrespective of such an issue, the importance placed upon RASA is driven by targets aimed towards what was previously the Research Assessment Exercise (‘RAE2008’), and what is now the Research Excellence Framework (‘REF2014’). It is thus becoming more common for research activities to be an explicit portion of an academic contract.

With the growing demands from fee paying students for good teaching (Biggs & Tang, 2007), in light of the growing ‘customerisation’ of HE (Love, 2008), and in mind of the on-going changes to the funding of the sector (Browne, 2010), the likelihood is that a greater emphasis and accountability will be placed upon the student experience and the quality of teaching which they receive (Metz, 2010; Nicolescu & Paun, 2009). If excellence in teaching is underpinned by ‘research informed practices’ (Verburgh, Elen, & Lindblom-Ylance, 2007), then it would seem logical that institutional strategies which focus on RASA might well come into greater focus.

This study is concerned with rationalising the conception and significance of research from the perspective of academic staff members; in considering the ways in which we think, organise, carry out, and support research and what we (and those with an interest in our work) get out of it. This research aims to give staff the opportunity to highlight their contextualised perceptions and experiences of RASA, principally from a UK context. This paper therefore aims to consider the intersection of these environments whereby Higher Education courses are delivered within Further Education environments, and the ways in which research and scholarly time manifests itself in such an environment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Engagement in research activity

Jenkins, Healey, and Zetter (2007) recognise the complex and varied meanings that the term ‘research’ has for academics, students, or wider society. In the purpose of this paper, activities labelled as RASA are considered as being all undertakings relating to publishable scholarly activity (both empirical and otherwise), as well as engagements considered to involve knowledge exchange or income generation. It is worth noting that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2009) further include the active progression of higher qualifications, consultancy, applied and practitioner research, conference attendance, the maintenance of up-to-date knowledge of chosen subject area, and secondments in industry (p. 158).

Professionalism in HE now appears to be judged in terms of the amount and quality of scholarly activity in which an academic engages; as such, there appears to be a marked shift away from professionalism being based on the judgement of teaching ability (Child, 2009). With this shifting emphasis in mind, the *Research Concordat* (2007) spoke of “the importance of researchers’ personal and career development” in that it should be “clearly recognised and promoted at all stages of their career” (p. 4). It has long been Government policy in the United Kingdom (UK) to concentrate research funding in a minority of (mostly older) Universities that have a track record of extensive and high quality research activity (Stanton, 2009). This has the potential to starve the ‘HE in FE’ sector of potential opportunities for research, and the resultant staff development which comes herewith.

2.2. Higher education in further education

Martin, Brown, Macdonald, and Gain (2000) speak about how the FE sector had been in a state of transition for almost 20 years. This can now be read as being 30, particularly in regards to the poorly understood complexity, scale and status of HE qualifications in FE environments (Parry, 2012). This follows on from the *Dearing Report* (NCIHE, 1997) which led to the expansion of such qualifications in FE environments, otherwise known as college based Higher Education. Harwood and Harwood (2004) present such a growth as being a product of *The Future of HE* White Paper (DfES, 2003) which saw FE as being a key site in the expansion of participation of students in HE courses. As a result, there is an increasing blurring of boundaries between the HE and FE sectors (Scott, 2010), leading to what is deemed by some to be a level of confusion regarding the mystery of how to differentiate between the two different sectors (Parry, 2009). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2009) display participation statistics which demonstrate that 4.93% of HE provision is delivered in Colleges. This is likely to be a statistic that further increases, as a result of the award of additional student numbers from the margin of institutions charging an average net tuition fee of £7500 or less, most recently allocated by HEFCE (see HEFCE, 2011). As course provisions change to meet market demands (through widening access to HE), and as the sector evolves to include a wider range of graduate level programmes which emphasise employability and vocational aims, FE has (over the past decade) offered opportunities for students to engage in HE courses in an environment which differs to that of

traditional HEI's. Equally, "because they were regarded as dependent upon institutions and labour market needs, no single structure was envisaged" for courses in this provision (Schofield & Dismore, 2010, p. 208).

It is worth noting that the contribution which the FE sector makes to HE courses is often quite distinct from that provided within traditional Universities, particularly in regards to the type of courses in which the students participate is considered (Gallacher, 2006). The differing course provisions of these changing contexts result in student experiences which are notably variable. In this type of context, students are often taught in a different culture from most traditional University students (Burkill, Rodway-Dyer, & Stone 2008). Staff are commonly asked to teach both FE and HE courses, and often lack the time or space to consider the changing ethos of each provision. Davies (2007) speaks of the excellence which can be provided through such a provision, but also cites the concern that there is often a lack of a HE culture.

2.3. Research within a 'HE in FE' context

Members of staff in a 'HE in FE' context are often keen to engage in research activities to support the development of their career. Anecdotally, it appears that academics in such an environment subscribe to the view that research and scholarly activities have played a key part in their own professional development and professional responsibility. However, the heightened pressures associated with a large teaching and pastoral workload in such an environment often leave staff having to carefully balance their time and subsequent commitments, and commonly at the expense of RASA. This study intends to consider the disjuncture between the rhetoric and the reality of RASA in a HE in FE environment, building upon the necessity for research which considers the potential differences between research, policy and practice (Locke, 2009).

Educational practitioners (irrespective of context) commonly perceive 'research' as something of value (Child, 2009). However, there is little research upon the nature of RASA in the very distinct environment of 'HE in FE'. Studies by Young (2002) and Burkill et al. (2008) consider a range of issues within this environment, but neither focus solely on the notion of scholarship – its comparative merit, worth, and significance. The relative importance of such scholarship appears to be a product of the demands placed upon staff as they meet the needs and expectations of their roles. Although the realities of HE, FE, and 'HE in FE' cultures differ greatly (which can cause difficulties when working collaboratively (Satchwell & Smith, 2009)), there remains the need to consider the particularities of the growing and unique context of 'HE in FE'. To do so, this paper presents data pertaining to staff experiences and perceptions of research and scholarship in a 'HE in FE' environment.

3. Study design

Data within this study emanated from a questionnaire which included both quantitative elements and opportunities for qualitative responses, resulting in a design which recognises the strengths of each approach (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002; Crotty, 1998). The decision to employ structure is in recognition of the ability of questionnaires to sample a relatively large population at little cost (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison 2000), and the potential for a depth of responses which might offer further insight into the limited detail associated with responses of a pure quantitative nature (Schostak, 2002). The writing of the questionnaire is underpinned by literature; the design and content is aligned to the descriptors set out within the four domains of the Vitae (2010) *Researcher Development Statement*, which encompass "knowledge and intellectual abilities", "personal effectiveness", "research governance and organisation", and "engagement, influence and impact" (p. 1).

The context in which this questionnaire was completed was selected through convenience sampling, which allows for a case study of one institution that fits the 'HE in FE' criteria of the study. The questionnaire was distributed to HE and FE teaching staff from within the same institution (irrespective of research experience), and who were engaged in the academic study sport, land and animal based subjects. Questionnaires were sent to 157 members of staff; 44 responses were received (20 from Higher Education, 23 from Further Education, and 1 from a member of staff who teaches within both environments). Ethical approval was received through standard institutional procedures.

The data from the questionnaires were analysed in two ways. Descriptive statistics associated with Likert responses were assessed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Thematic analysis (adopting the principles of constant comparison) was then conducted upon qualitative responses, deductively structured according to the nuances of the *Research Development Statement* (Vitae, 2010). In the generation of constructs within these sections, such qualitative analysis was attentive to and conscious of the temporal principles of nuance and narrative (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005).

4. Results and analysis

Light et al. (2009) reinforces the notion that, for the vast majority of academics, the teaching–research relationship is the principal feature defining their own academic practice. Research is what makes the study of a subject 'Higher' in HE – it serves the important features of a University education such as instilling intellectual virtues, empirical evidence, and the need to underpin opinion with clear argument (Johnson, 2010). The data of this study appears to consider this relationship as one which is very fragile; there appears some tension between the desire of respondents to re-assert their professionalism, and conduct RASA, and a perceived lack of opportunities to do so.

The data from this sample will be presented in four parts, separated as per the structure of the questionnaire (in line with the *Research Development Statement* outlined above). Qualitative and quantitative data will be woven into the discussion to

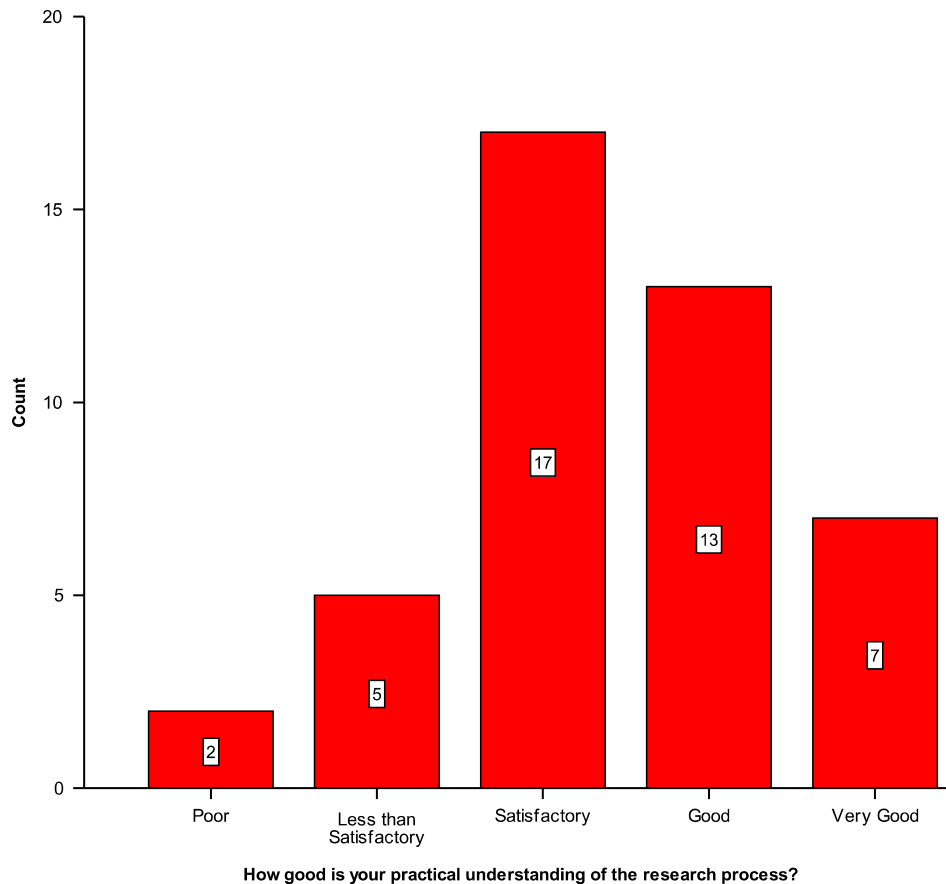


Fig. 1. Practical understanding of research process.

present a holistic collection of views. The mean responses which are cited are portrayed relative to likert scale labels (1=poor, 6=excellent).

4.1. Knowledge and intellectual abilities

The first section that participants were asked to respond to included three questions relating to their '*knowledge and intellectual abilities*' of research and the research process, in terms of the teaching and application of methods and methodology. Fig. 1 highlights that the majority of staff perceived themselves to have at least a satisfactory level of practical understanding in regards to the research process.

This was further elaborated upon by a number of participants, who spoke of their understanding of the research process and their ability to guide students in this regard. Staff spoke of their perceived ability "*to guide students*", despite an acknowledged lack of research output of their own. Furthermore, Fig. 2 details how respondents perceived understanding of actual research methods was also broadly satisfactory or higher, with some highlighting an 'excellent' level of understanding.

This positive picture of perceived knowledge was somewhat tainted by a general lack of confidence which transcended the qualitative questionnaire responses. An indicative response described "*limited personal experiences*", which led to frustrations as many staff spoke of the desire to do more – "*would love to develop my research output as I realise the importance thereof*".

4.2. Personal effectiveness

The second section of the questionnaire looked to build upon these initial perceptions, with a range of questions concerning matters relating to '*personal effectiveness*'. In regards to the practical issues associated with the delivery of a study involving primary data collection, respondents showed a positive level of perceived awareness when asked about their ability to collect data for themselves, independently (Fig. 3).

A less positive trend is witnessed when considering the responses that indicate a relatively poor awareness of data analysis principles and procedures (Fig. 4). The practicalities associated with FE employment contracts, that stipulate a high degree of teaching hours, render opportunities to conduct research to be few and far between (Harwood & Harwood, 2004). Child (2009) speaks of how FE lecturers appear more likely to be 'agents' of research in comparison to HE staff who are often

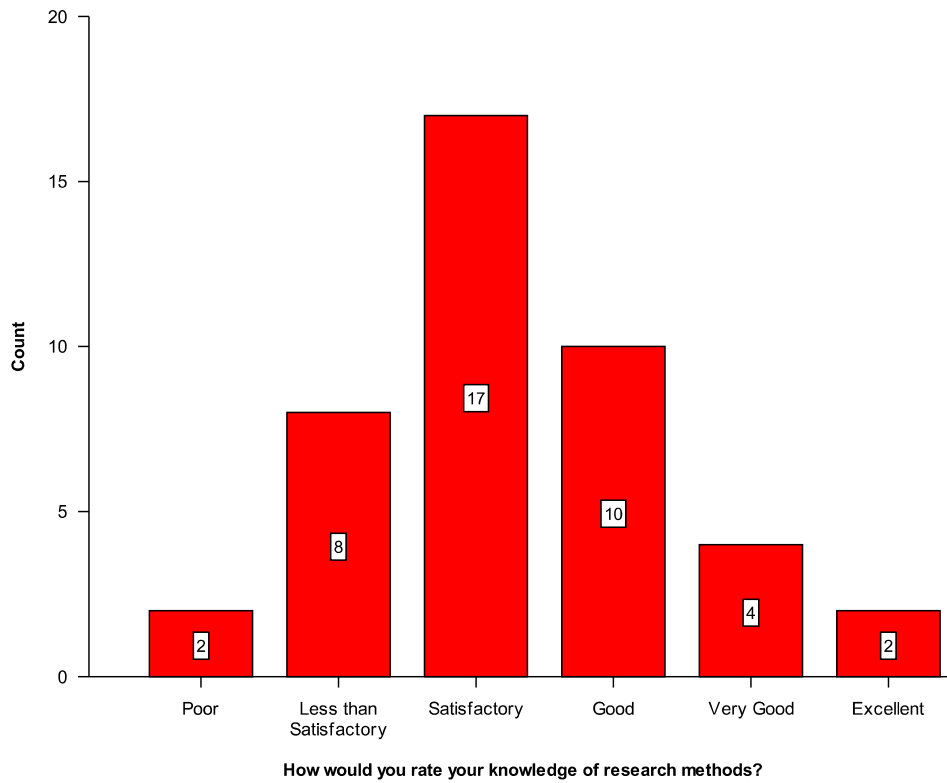


Fig. 2. Knowledge of research methods.

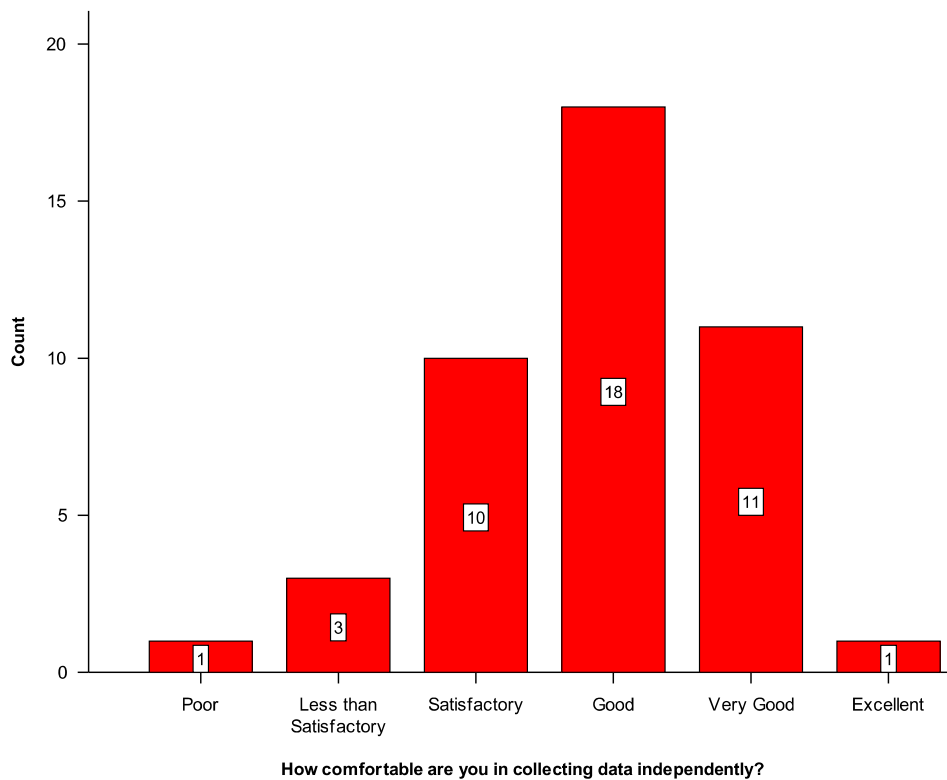


Fig. 3. Independent data collection.

the ‘instigators’ and creators of research. This research has in some way corroborated this perception, when detailing the lack of confidence which staff cited in writing and publishing their work.

These perceptions are again reflected in self-deprecating supplementary comments which describe feelings that relate to a “*lack of experience of real world research*” which results in “*limited confidence in conducting data analysis*”. Indeed some

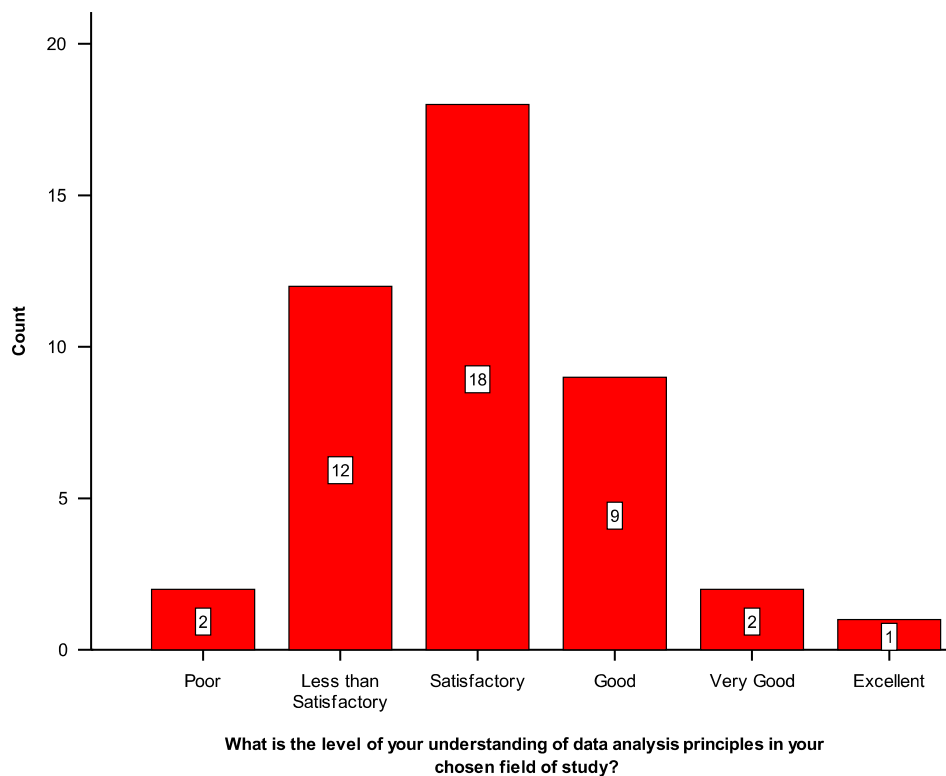


Fig. 4. Understanding of data analysis principles.

of the most concerning results of this study were the perceptions of staff in regards to their level of research output. Fig. 5 details the opinions that show the majority of staff perceiving the level of their current output to be 'poor'.

The critical nature of such an evaluation has clear connotations in regards to motivation and self-perception of research abilities. Having opportunities to conduct RASA is part of what it is to be a lecturer. Although not a simplistic or straightforward relationship, the status and recognition that comes with conducting research helps to create a positive balance in regards to all other commitments involved with working in HEI's and FE environments. When asked to elaborate many respondents described the "workload barriers" (such as administrative duties and issues of student management) which they faced when attempting to overcome the hurdle of publication quantity. Staff detailed how much of their scholarly writing was completed in their own free time (outside of the normal working day), as "time constraints (or perceived time constraints) remain(ed) a huge barrier". It is unsurprising that such an evaluation results in a broadly negative perception of output, and its subsequent potential to have an impact on a national level. With this in mind, it seems noteworthy to consider the personal development needs of staff working in a HE in FE context in light of these sentiments, especially when recognising the relative experience of the population who largely self-certified as being either an 'early career' or 'novice' researcher. Staff responsible for the proliferation of research activities in a 'HE in FE' context might thus pursue an agenda which recognises the need to "promote a strong mentoring culture" under such circumstances (Universities UK, 2010, p. 20).

4.3. Research governance and organisation

The third section of the questionnaire included questions which concerned issues of 'research governance and organisation', central to the ideal that research is one of the key constituents of a culture of 'HEness' (Lea and Simmons, 2012). Data from these questions consisted of predominantly localised issues relating to the context within which participants were working, however the outcomes remain important and worthy of note. Indeed one of the most alarming aspects of the questionnaire findings are those cited in Fig. 6. Participants signalled their belief that there are inadequate opportunities of support, in both a formal and informal sense, for those of them who would like to engage in further research development.

Participants described a teaching workload which resulted in the perception that they "hardly get any time to think of research". These pressures appeared further exacerbated by experiences which led to beliefs that such efforts were "not supported by anyone". In this context, such discouragement appeared the product of a lack of a transparent support system.

As previously intimated, the Research Concordat (2007) describes "the importance of researchers' personal and career development" in that it should be "clearly recognised and promoted at all stages of their career" (p. 4). In light of the findings of this questionnaire, and in focussing on the context to which it relates, it appears that more could be done to

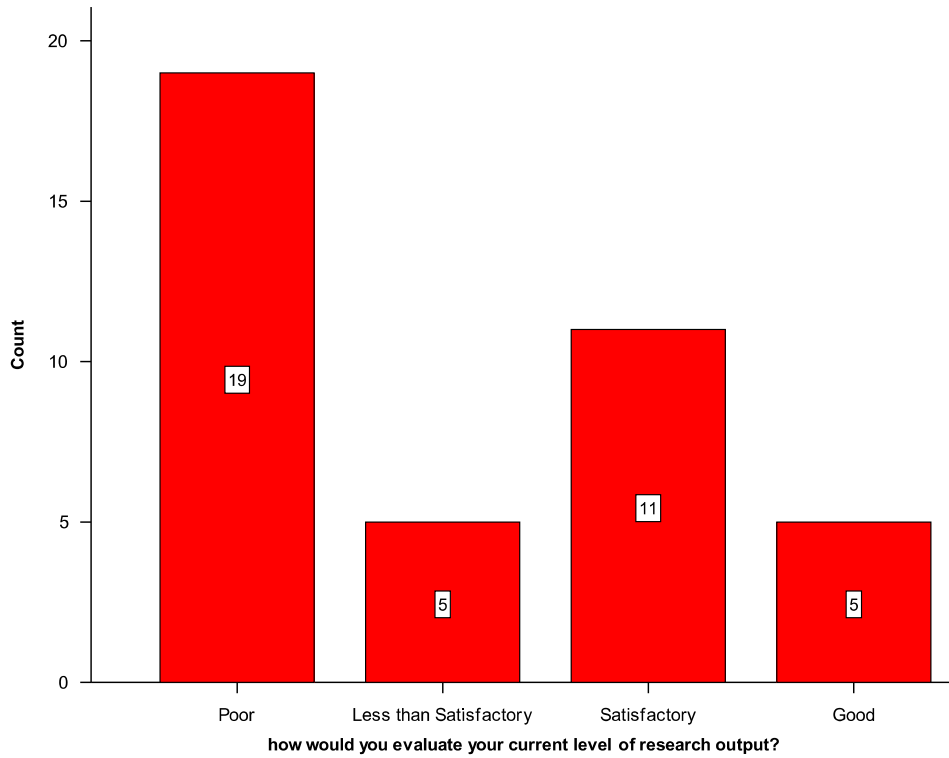


Fig. 5. Current level of research output.

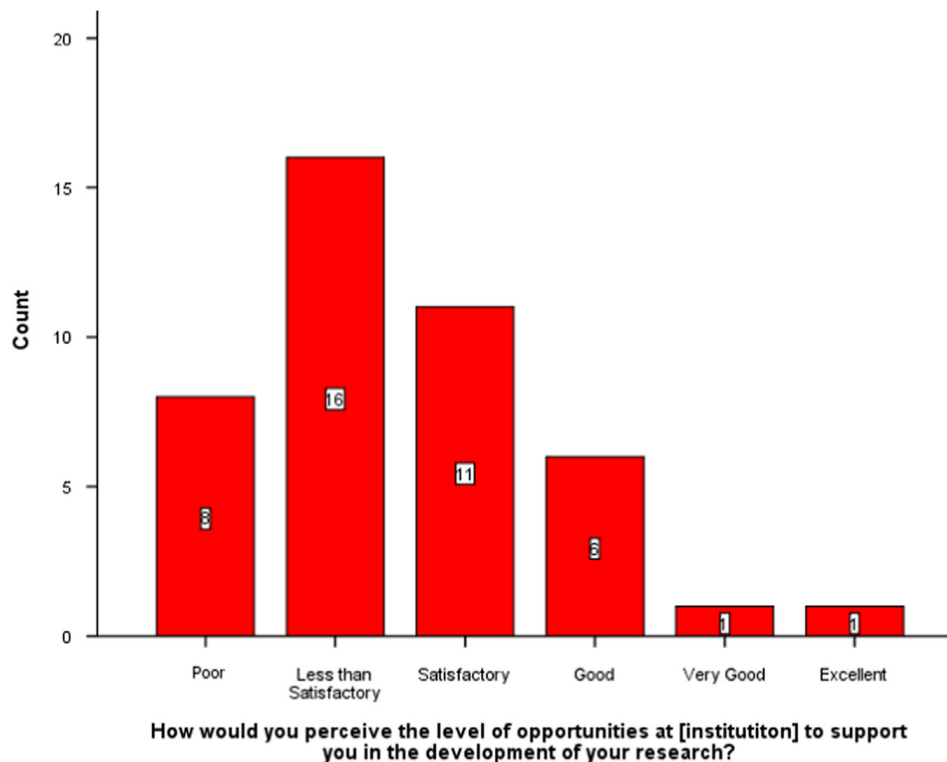


Fig. 6. Institutional support opportunities.

recognise this perceived need. Indeed, this perceived lack of confidence does not appear to be supported through what might be termed a research ‘culture’ that you would expect in larger HEI’s. [Harwood and Harwood \(2004\)](#) corroborate these findings, in finding that only 11% of their questionnaire respondents were able to acknowledge an explicit policy for scholarship within their FE institutions. As FE colleges now comprise a major component of the HE sector ([Scott, 2009](#)), this tension has the potential to be something felt by a large population of this growing demographic.

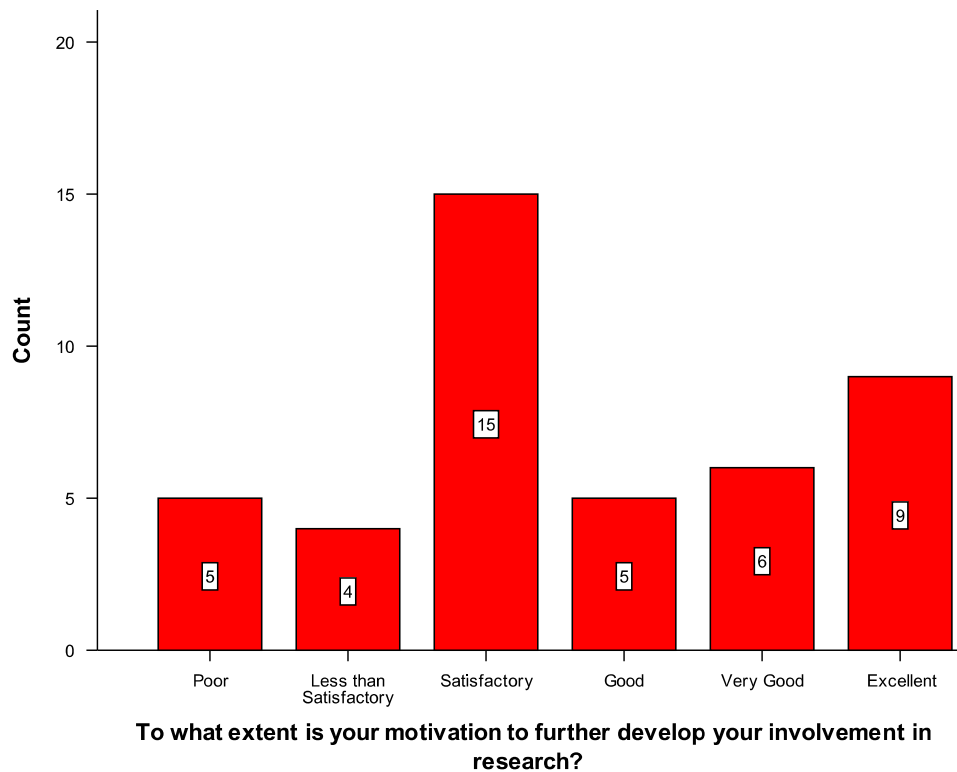


Fig. 7. Motivation to develop involvement.

4.4. Engagement, influence and impact

The final section of the questionnaire related to perceptions aligned to issues of ‘engagement, influence and impact’. Despite the broadly negative self-perceptions described above, respondents demonstrated that they still held onto a motivation to further develop their involvement in research activities (Fig. 7).

Despite the underlying abilities of staff, their motivation to be involved in further research activities, and their comfort in supporting students when considering matters of research; there appears to remain the overall perception that there is a challenging research culture within the institution sampled. Their appeared the consensus that there was a requirement for “more recognition of the importance of doing research”.

5. Conclusions

The particular research culture which a ‘HE in FE’ environment evokes is worthy of note, even if it remains difficult to define. The ‘HE in FE’ context is one where there remain tensions and areas of concerns regarding staff workloads, conflicting quality assurance systems, student support and funding (Scott, 2010). These tensions appear to have filtered through into the data of this study, whereby the respondents have recognised the multiple factors which combine to restrict the time available to staff wanting to conduct empirical research. This further emphasises the engrained cultural challenges which Young (2002) spoke of a decade ago in that, even then, staff were burdened by “housekeeping” duties in an environment which was perceived as being “anti-academic” (p. 282). The findings of this study appear to demonstrate that there appears the need to concentrate upon encouraging, promoting, and fostering a culture of enabling and doing research. The professional development of researcher effectiveness, especially in mind of the growing importance of outcome based research classifications (i.e. REF2014) which in some way have begun to define what it is to be a HE lecturer.

Underpinning these motivations is the overarching sense that, as academic members of staff (whether experienced or not, whether teaching focussed or not, whether consumed by administration or not), lecturers in a HE in FE context are conscious that they are subscribing to the value that research and scholarly activities have a key part to play in their professional development and professional responsibility. It is important that the outcomes of this questionnaire are kept in mind to help support the continued provision of such opportunities across this sector of provision.

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