

The Cambridge Assessment Network

Andrew Watts Cambridge Assessment Network

The mission of the Cambridge Assessment Network is to become 'a virtual centre of excellence' for professional development in assessment. It was launched in October 2005 at the first, very successful Cambridge Assessment Conference. The theme of the conference was 'Maintaining Trust in Public Assessment Systems', which indicated the kind of underlying issue in assessment that the Cambridge Assessment Network aims to address. The Network recently launched its internal, virtual learning environment, Campus, for Cambridge Assessment staff. This is an informal communication channel through which staff can share knowledge via discussion boards, chat rooms and other online activities. At the beginning of April a similar external website, AssessNet, was launched for those assessment professionals, both in the UK and internationally, who want to belong to a world-wide assessment network.

The Research Division and the Cambridge Assessment Network have already established a close working relationship. The work of researchers is a prime source of new material for Network seminars and workshops, and the Network supports the dissemination of research ideas throughout the Cambridge Assessment Group. In Autumn 2005 a short series of seminars was run in which all members of the Research Division participated. These were well attended in both Coventry and in Cambridge, where we had to move out of our own buildings to bigger rooms because of the numbers wishing to attend. Colleagues from all business streams appreciated the opportunity to keep up-to-date with current thinking and to think through ideas beyond their immediate sphere of work. A format of having three short presentations in one longer seminar, with discussion between each and at the end, proved informative and stimulating.

In meeting up in such events with colleagues from across the Cambridge Assessment Group, members of the Research Division benefit from the comments and suggestions of those who are engaged in the day-to-day work of developing assessments. Thus such seminars can be a forum in which material is introduced which is being worked up into a publication or conference paper. The interaction with colleagues can be a first outing for ideas which will be refined later in the light of the discussion.

Members of the Research Division have a particular part to play in the Cambridge Assessment Group, since the opportunities they have had to work in different parts of the business often give them a broad view of what is happening. They can thus describe for us the bigger picture and also remind us of the underlying principles on which our work is based. An example is Tom Bramley's seminar series on 'The Basics of Assessment'. This has been run in both Cambridge and Coventry/ Birmingham and has proved very successful, with average attendance of over 25 at the sessions. Many of those who attended commented on the usefulness of being able to stand back and think about how fundamental concepts apply to their work. Another example of research work put to Group-wide use is the Question Writers' Interactive Learning Tool (QWILT), which continues to be used from time to time in the training of examiners by colleagues in OCR, both general assessment and vocational, and in CIE. Last summer Victoria Crisp, from the Research Division, and Andrew Watts

ran a one-week workshop for officers in the Singapore Ministry of Education using that material.

On a broader front, members of the Research Division have led the way in promoting a culture in which it is expected that we share what we know and that from time to time we will present aspects of our work to our peers. This kind of activity is fundamental to the successful running of a lively community of practice. The Cambridge Assessment Network aims to encourage such participation as a way to establish a Group-wide learning culture in Cambridge Assessment.

The Cambridge Assessment Network and the Research Division also work together to disseminate new ideas in assessment and to help colleagues to keep in touch with what is developing in the world of assessment. In the Network's 'New Horizons' seminar series innovations are discussed with colleagues from across the Group. One such issue is the use that will be made of item level data from public examinations, once it becomes more available through greater use of on-line collection of data and the electronic management of examination scripts.

The Network ran a seminar on this for members of the Group in April.

When it comes to informal networking, research staff have been able to contribute particularly because they have information that is perhaps not available to others or they have a different perspective. This helps the kind of exchange and the kind of exploration of issues across business streams which is one of the main objectives of the Cambridge Assessment Network. Members of the Division have also been active in chairing discussion groups and seminars, in facilitating cross-business stream discussions, and in introducing visiting speakers.

The Cambridge Assessment Network believes strongly in the value of informal meetings, and those with research colleagues have proved very beneficial. As Network staff have prepared materials and written courses and papers, informal discussions have taken place, materials have been exchanged and ideas refined. The benefits of informal exchanges are not just one-way since Cambridge Assessment Network writers get help with their materials and research staff explore how to communicate their ideas effectively to those working in other areas.

Finally, another opportunity for working together took place at the end of March when the Cambridge Assessment Network introduced a seminar at Transport House at which members of the Research Division presented some significant work on aspects of students' writing in English examinations.

All in all, the links between the Research Division and the Cambridge Assessment Network are already significant. We believe that it is highly beneficial for our Research teams to have different channels of communication to different audiences both in the Group and beyond. Also, it is important that research can feed in to the professional development of those who want to improve their understanding of assessment issues. The Cambridge Assessment Network also benefits, by having close at hand a source of lively ideas and high quality research, as well as a team of colleagues who are willing to present what they know and discuss it at events for their colleagues from the wider Group.