

A Survey of Opinions of the Value of the EPSRC EQUAL Initiative and the EQUAL Network

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0. Summary

Analysis of a survey of the opinions and experiences of Principal Investigators and of feedback from the evaluation forms of participants in EQUAL Network workshops reveal a strong degree of support for the EQUAL Initiative and the Network. Both are seen as valuable and effective and to be making a range of worthwhile contributions variously to meeting the needs of older people, of practitioners and of the research community. Whilst evaluations are very favourable especially for an activity which brings together a very wide range of stakeholders, some shortcomings and difficulties have been suggested and there is a minority view which questions the way in which the Initiative and the Network are organised. However, the analysis suggests many important features about the Initiative and the Network which would be valuable to incorporate into any further ageing or disability related research programmes pursued by EPSRC. In particular the findings provide ample justification for the insistence that all EQUAL projects should be interdisciplinary, incorporate collaboration with service providers, and involve older and disabled people. Much of the success of the projects, the commitment of the researchers, and the interest of other stakeholders flows directly from these requirements.

1. Introduction

At the conclusion of the three year funding period for the Network the opinions of members of the Network have been surveyed about the value of EQUAL. These views have been gathered in two ways.

Since a prime purpose of the Network has been to support the momentum created by the EQUAL Initiative, the first approach has been a postal survey of opinions about the Network and the Initiative of those who hold or have held awards from the EQUAL Initiative. Whilst it would have been possible to carry out a much wider survey, involving those employed as research assistants and collaborators in the projects, and this would be appropriate for a full scale appraisal of the EQUAL Initiative, the scale of such a survey would be out of proportion to the resources available to the Network.

Secondly, since for the broad range of membership the main contact with the Network has been the workshops, for their views reliance has been placed on feedback following each workshop when extensive information has been gathered and analysed. Thus, it was not thought worthwhile to survey all members about the Network since the information obtained would be substantially similar, at least from those who were actively engaged.

The survey of investigators

Usually the Principal Investigator for each of the EQUAL projects but in some cases a Co-investigator was contacted with a request to complete a questionnaire about the Initiative and the Network. Because some Principal Investigators have held several

awards 34 individuals were approached. Twenty questionnaires were completed, in one case by telephone interview, and some were received too late to be included in this analysis. Eighteen had received awards as a result of one of the first three rounds of EQUAL and two had become involved as a result of the fourth round and so had rather less experience of the Initiative and Network. Three quarters were very familiar with the work of the Network but, whilst having some knowledge, the others were rather detached. This was for a variety of reasons, but two respondents held the view that although useful for newcomers Networks were of little value to mature researchers. As will be seen this view was contrary to those of most of the respondents all of but two of whom were also mature researchers.

The questionnaire was in three parts: the outcomes of the respondents' projects, views on the EQUAL Initiative, and opinions about the EQUAL Network.

2. The EQUAL Projects

The opportunity was taken to enquire about the outcomes of the individual EQUAL projects. This was seen as especially important to the continued promotion of the type of research represented by EQUAL, where it is very useful to be able to indicate the scope and variety of outputs achieved, and not least to provide medium term feedback to EPSRC about the impact of the projects.

Outcomes

Nineteen respondents summarised the published outputs from their projects, although for five their projects had not yet been completed. As might be expected published outputs varied greatly from books and papers to reports in the National Press and TV appearances. The impression given is that as well as the usual range of academic publications many formal reports of the projects have been in the type of publications and through media likely to be accessed by practitioners and to some extent directly by older and disabled people themselves.

Published Outputs Respondents = 19	A few 1-3	Some 4-6	Many
Report/Book/Guide published by a recognised publishing house	3		
Report/Book/Guide published by an organisation concerned with older or disabled people, charity or government organisation	4	1	
Report/Book/Guide published by the project team or university	4	1	
Chapters in books	7	1	
Refereed Journal papers	10	2	1
Papers in technical and professional press	6	1	
Conference papers/posters published as proceedings	6	5	4
Conference and national seminar/workshop papers/posters not published	8	3	3
Reports in national press	9	1	
Other published reports on the project by third parties/journalists etc	7	1	1
Others: TV appearances	2		
Others: EQUAL Web Site Summary, Other websites with technical reports, Mail lists (such as Accessibuilt), press releases			

Possibly more interesting is that most respondents could point to several, and for some many, other contributions from their projects. Examples of direct contributions were: devices and systems ready to be used and which in some cases were being used; ideas, information and methods which were informing policy and practice; and in some cases information and methods which either supported or significantly challenged existing approaches. The EQUAL projects have stimulated the development of a range of courses for practitioners, modules for undergraduate and masters courses and even complete degree courses, thus enabling the outcomes of the research to influence directly the education and training of current and future practitioners. Individuals have also benefited from their projects, through prestigious appointments, for example, as keynote lecturers or to important committees, and in a few cases the award of consultancy work. Some attributed their personal promotions and the award of prizes to team members as a result of EQUAL.

Other Outcomes Respondents=19	Yes	Maybe	Examples
A device, data, guidance or system which could be used directly and instrumentally	11	1	Prototypes (8), Commercially available tools (1), Codes and design data (2)
Ideas and perspectives which could be used conceptually, possibly integrated with information from other sources, for example, in policy formulation	7	1	User-led design and systems (2), assessment and planning methods (2), government strategy (1), design methods (2)
Information which could be used in part to support or challenge existing practices and policies	9	2	Alternatives to current practice (4), major improvements to practice (2), user involvement in design, training care staff in new approaches, support for new therapies,
Inputs to educational courses	8	1	Theoretical Models, Invited lectures, workshops for practitioners, new undergraduate and masters modules and masters courses,
Invitations to team members as experts in specific areas, for example as key-note speakers, to join committees, to undertake consultancy assignments	11		Fellowships overseas, invited talks and key-note lectures national and international, commercial consultancy, government, research council and international scientific committees panels
Career advancement, for example promotion or retention of a post	7		Promotion, prizes for contribution to science/engineering
Gaining qualifications, for example a doctorate for a member of a research team	4	1	Doctorates for some investigators and also for RAs
Further research opportunities	13		RC and EU grants, charity awards, work with government bodies
Other: benefit to patients, stimulation of young researchers			

Impact Measurement

When asked about the how best to measure the impact of their projects most respondents felt that the best measures should be based on the outcomes already reviewed. However, whilst noting that the measures would vary according to the nature of a project they frequently highlighted as important: publications (especially in scientific journals) (10 out of 15 respondents), impact on practitioners and practices (12) and direct application of their work to benefit older and disabled people (6), but the time scales of the projects were too short to enable proper evaluation of the latter.

Finally, six respondents considered that an important measure was the extent to which their work had stimulated debate about the care of older people, this included the role of inclusive design, and the extent to which their work had impacted other disciplines. Some individual comments were also important, for example, the significance of citations and an ability to attract doctoral students.

A similar question about the measurement of the impact of the entire EQUAL Initiative attracted similar comments, but in this case the emphasis was placed on publications, impact on older and disabled people, impact on policy, and ultimately whether the Initiative has created sufficient momentum for research to continue unaided when EQUAL funding expires. Individual comments were also important, for example, keeping in mind the objectives of EQUAL, the extent to which it has facilitated user involvement and the degree of interdisciplinarity.

3. THE EQUAL Initiative

Respondents' views were also gathered about the EQUAL Initiative as distinct from the projects.

Requirements of the EQUAL Initiative

Respondents were asked whether, compared with conventional research programmes, the requirements of the EQUAL Initiative were helpful or troublesome.

Overall, the comments showed that the requirements had been helpful. Of the 20 respondents, three made neutral comments and 17 made favourable comments. Of the latter, 11 were quite positive. Three of these liked the need to focus on the target audience and three others appreciated the skill mix of researchers. Another found it helpful not to have to provide quarterly reports.

Six of the 17 respondents made extremely favourable comments, picking out "significant rewards" in expanding their own knowledge and the ability to "assemble an amazing group of people who were motivated and eager to learn from each other". "The requirements of EQUAL were very helpful initially... the focus of EQUAL gave the project a much better chance of success... than under responsive mode". "Very useful ...it is sometimes difficult to know the most appropriate Research Council to which to submit a responsive mode proposal". Others commented on how "the initiative facilitated the creation of multi-disciplinary consortia, a model that is now gaining popularity", and "the mandatory requirement for user involvement ensured that the EQUAL projects have both academic and direct practical value ...it makes this programme stand out from so many others".

The one clearly negative comment concerned the long timescale from the expression of interest until the point of award of a consortia grant plus the great amount of work necessary for the Principal Investigators in finalising partnership agreements and co-ordinating the work with partners.

Value of involvement with the EQUAL Initiative

All 20 respondents were positive and enthusiastic in their replies, for a variety of reasons.

Reason	Examples
Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The range of practitioners and other researchers • Cross institutional & disciplinary collaboration • Novel & creative research collaborations • All researchers learning skills from each other: approaches to problems and solutions • Feeling part of a wider EQUAL community • It led to good relationship with an industrial partner • Support offered by Network has been particularly welcome
Philosophical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like the idea • Gain a broader perspective of problems of ageing and disability • Make the world a better place • Worthwhile: research where it matters and for whom it matters
Practical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship of innovative research in technology and the older user • Good practical and research outcomes
Developmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stimulated new and challenging areas of work • Made me aware of the range of activity in this research field • Allowing us to develop new methodological skills
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding was certainly helpful • Good funding for a project which would be difficult to obtain elsewhere • Funding enabled work to address a critical issue for which support would not be available from elsewhere
Research Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided opportunity for research and other outcomes • Led to the development of a research centre on inclusive design • Resulted in dissemination to other professionals and organisations in this field
EQUAL Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending EQUAL workshops involving disciplines and practitioners outside normal research community • Support offered by the Network has been very welcome

Two reservations were voiced: that “as a newcomer it was ‘difficult to break in’ to the community”. Another respondent commented that “I like the idea of EQUAL but cannot think of any personal benefits”.

Gaining further funding from outside of EQUAL

Of the 20 respondents 11 claimed that further funding had been secured as a result of their EQUAL projects, from, for example, the Thomas Pocklington Trust, the Housing Corporation, FP6, a third EPSRC project, collaboration with DoH, Disability Rights Commission, European Science Foundation and a BT research fellowship.

Three were in the process of applying or definitely planned to do so, one in collaboration with another EQUAL team. Three responded that proposals for further funding had not yet been successful.

Several respondents commented on the unique nature of EQUAL, one in detail "...we would have liked to pursue additional funding from EPSRC as the 'nature' of what can be done with EPSRC is different than that which is supported by other funding bodies".

Increased involvement with user community

All 20 respondents replied, and all but two now had greater involvement with users. Examples quoted included a new contacts in hospitals, use of expert groups of professionals and older people in projects, contact with new communities such as participants at the Older Worker EQUAL Workshop. Several respondents valued their increased contact with user groups. "We now have very good working relationships with a number of user organisations that are already very valuable to us for other project work." Interestingly, several respondents said that they had already been enjoying good links within the research community, practitioners and users, so presumably their EQUAL projects were able to build on this. However, in one instance, lack of further funding had ended this valued new momentum.

One respondent commented that as their work was very specialised and they already had very good links with their subjects involvement had not increased. Another commented "no, not reallybecause of self-imposed isolation plus a concern about the quality of some funded projects."

Future ageing and disability research.

All respondents intended to continue working in the areas covered by EQUAL and answered very positively and enthusiastically: "absolutely yes", "yes, until I retire", "yes, and to push for users' input to be recognised as an 'expert' in collaboration with academics", "definitely", "it is a major project area for us these days", "another will be particularly working with children". Qualifying comments were "Yes, but as a broader remit examining relations between people and the environment" and "..... we recently appointed a new member of staff with a specific interest in inclusive design and it is likely that he will be more involved in ageing and disability research".

Factors encouraging more involvement in ageing and disability research

Sixteen respondents offered comments on the need for further engagement. Of these, three were highly enthusiastic protesting that they did not need any extra encouragement to continue with this worthwhile research!

The types of encouragement which were identified as required fell into six categories.

Interdisciplinary *collaboration* was a heartfelt need: "... the establishment of successful and sustained multidisciplinary research teams who are willing to share knowledge and expertise", "keen collaboration", "working with other creative people". As part of this "a network is essential", "we are an isolated research centre and the opportunity to network with other people from other disciplinesis critical". A more specific suggestion was made for "a national register of users (and organisations / companies) prepared to participate in projects related to ageing and disability and their type of participation", "a more active brokerage facility for collaboration would be useful." A concrete example of the need for multidisciplinary work was given in the area of 'smart homes', where "technology push can undervalue the need for social and psychological input to the project".

The type of *researchers* needed was set out in two replies: "... more well qualified graduates... people who can be hard edged as EPSRC want for 'good science' but also soft centred to work directly with users". "Closer links with target users and manufacturers" were required by one researcher.

Funding was seen to be the most important issue for one respondent. Linked to this, "The current trend in government support for technology to support elderly people is a very strong stimulus, because of the potential resources that could support successful new developments" and similarly, "government policy, even if not supported by funding streams, has often facilitated research in the past." One called for more specific initiatives/calls related to ageing and disability.

Methodological advice in the area of expert assistance with communication and with engagement of older and disabled participants would be appreciated.

Enhancing the *credibility* of the research undertaken was a theme mentioned by three respondents. "Knowledge that the results will be taken seriously" put it succinctly. Also, "more acceptance of the worth of conference papers in this area". There is a need to know that "... interdisciplinary research of the EQUAL variety is not going to be penalised by journal editors or RAE panel assessors". One respondent felt the need for more journals directly related to the area.

Greater publicity to the *uptake* of such research was also required, "evidence of research product uptake" and "seeing the benefits of work" were felt to be encouraging.

Factors discouraging more involvement in ageing and disability research

There were 15 responses to this question. These can be grouped according to four main headings which can cause discouragement.

The most frequent mentioned issue was difficulties of securing *collaborators* and then in all working together: "difficulty in finding collaborators", "a focus on the 'old boys' network", "politics associated with multi-institutional large scale consortia rather than standard project grant schemes", "the effort required to negotiate complex consensus building between groups", summed up by one as "quite stressful (but more rewarding)", and "technology transfer needs incentives to involve manufacturers".

Funding difficulty was a fairly predictable area highlighted by three people: "Bureaucracy and a less than level playing field", "lack of vision and risk taking" and the discouragement arising from the failure to obtain further funding.

Ethical aspects drew three comments: "the new system for applying for ethical approval", "Difficulties in accessing patient information through health records" and "tokenism".

The need for *social science* input as well as technological input to the research to make it really applicable to actual received three comments: "overemphasis on technology led rather than need (or user) led research", similarly "...emphasis on technological rather than socio-technical solutions" leading to "a lack of application to practice and the real world". One respondent regretted the lack of emphasis on

design. Sadly, but maybe realistically, one person felt the topic (of ageing or disability) was not seen as important, career wise.

On an optimistic note, two respondents just expressed their strong commitment to this area of research – nothing would discourage them.

Summary

Respondents offered wide and varied views about their projects and the Initiative especially as their projects had generated many outputs. In addition to conventional academic material much of the output was practice and user orientated. Some of this refined and developed existing practice and perspectives, others challenged them. There was plenty of evidence of projects stimulating the development of educational courses, and thus having a long term and systemic influence on existing and future practitioners, and of the value of the projects to the careers and standing of individual researchers.

There was a consistent view that along with conventional measures the performance of most projects should also be judged in terms of impact on practitioners and, possibly, application as well as the contribution to the debate on the care of older and disabled people. These measures, but particularly the impact on practice and policy, were seen as even more important when considering the Initiative as a whole.

Respondents views of the Initiative were generally very favourable and often they identified issues which had benefited from the requirement for interdisciplinarity and user involvement. However, a variety of difficulties were mentioned relating to the operation of EQUAL.

A range of suggestions were made about the factors which would encourage and discourage further engagement in ageing and disability research. Mostly these suggested strengthening the basic requirements of the Initiative (interdisciplinarity, collaboration, user involvement). Certainly schemes which did not provide for the involvement of, say, social scientists (which was encouraged by EQUAL) would be a cause of discouragement, as would the lack of special funding. Here there were echoes of difficulties experienced by the consortia and the politics and bureaucracy which accompany large projects.

4. The EQUAL Network

Four areas of interest were investigated: communication, workshops, achieving objectives and the future.

Communication

Communication with members and contacts by the secretariat has been almost entirely through email and the website and very occasionally by telephone. So the Network has been dependent on members taking notice of email messages and the contents of the web site. Also there has been a deliberate attempt to limit contact with members and to use email only where there has been important information to offer, such as about forthcoming workshops, annual reports on Network activities, funding opportunities or significant developments in the world of ageing research, and not to trouble members with the gossip and minutiae which can be an annoying feature of many mail lists.

Eighteen of the 20 respondents claimed to receive and read these emails, and the remaining two did so “sometimes”. The website was frequented by three quarters of the respondents at least once every three to four months but more frequently prior to and following workshops and when specific information was required, for example to download presentations which are available on the web. However, four respondents referred to the website less than once every six months and one had never consulted it. A view was offered that in respect of email and Website “much more had been achieved than by higher profile networks such as NCAR”.

Each year an Annual Report of the activities of the Network has been placed on the website and members and contacts informed about its presence through email and at workshops. Half of the respondents claimed to have read these, three were “not sure”, seven had not (five of whom were detached from the Network).

Workshops

The main opportunity for members to become involved with the Network has been by attending the twelve workshops. Three respondents had not attended any although for two of these their colleagues had been involved. Five had attended one workshop, four had attended two, and eight had attended three or more workshops. Several commented that their team members had attended other workshops, so that their teams would have been represented at the majority of workshops, and the teams of two other respondents had been represented at practically all of the workshops.

Comments about the value of the workshops were very positive, and generally in terms of direct value to the respondent or, for those who were more detached, to their research assistants. Frequent comments about benefits included: “networking”, “new contacts”, “meeting other researchers”, “meeting practitioners”, “awareness of problems faced by the user community”, “feedback on own research – EQUAL projects and other work”, “finding out about other projects”, “gaining different perspectives” and “useful ideas” especially “about ‘hot’ issues”, and “interesting and stimulating presentations”. Individual comments included that workshops provided “a chance to think”, “a feeling of belonging to a community” and “have always gained something”. This was summed up by one respondent by “they had a very “networky” feel to them...their multidisciplinary nature meant that you got to chat with all sorts of people you would not otherwise talk to. Addresses were swapped and a number of leads followed. My own staff came back with thoughts... clearly inspired”. “The workshops were one of the main successes of EQUAL.” “They had that buzz that you often get in the early stages of a new scientific organisation and a feel that they are part of something new which is going somewhere.”

Of the 20 respondents 13 had made presentations and the work of four others had been presented by their research assistants. They were asked to comment on this involvement. The responses were similar to but even more favourable than those given for involvement with the workshops, especially the value of being able to present and discuss work with an audience which was more varied and more critical than usual. This was of value at both the outset of projects and towards their conclusion, generating positive feedback and shaping the direction of some projects. “Useful contacts were made”, there were “invitations to join other research groups” and “to participate in other dissemination events” and for some there was the “opportunity for media coverage”. However one respondent noted that “there was

limited time to discuss issues in great detail”. Another was “disappointed not to been invited to do more presentations”.

Achieving objectives

The Network had two key objectives and four areas of focus.

1. *To develop the embryonic network which had emerged as a result of the first two calls for funding.* Of the seventeen who responded, two were uncertain or unable to offer an evaluation, two felt it had achieved the objectives “in part” and thirteen were very positive. Comments included “objective fully achieved”, “created a sense of involvement”, “facilitated a thriving new community”, and “succeeded in bringing together researchers with very different backgrounds”. Interestingly one commented that “this aim has moved on - the network is much wider” and there were some caveats “not all workshops were research orientated... because they are wide ranging”, and “there isn’t necessarily congruency between everyone’s interests”.
2. *Engaging a wider community of interest to create an interdisciplinary network of researchers, policy makers, service providers, users and user representatives, intermediaries, government, industrial and commercial organisations.* Of the 16 who responded one felt that this “hadn’t been achieved”, two responded “probably” and 13 were clearly positive. There were some concerns. Whilst some felt that the objective had been achieved through workshops and reports which had brought together a variety of disciplines and users and had facilitated collaboration between researchers and intermediaries leading to new projects “user involvement could be greater”, and there was “not enough engagement with policy makers and commercial organisations”. Some thought there was a “need for consolidation” and that whilst “...the Network had provided an initial impetus, without significant funding to cement relationships between stakeholders it is difficult to judge the robustness of the community”.
3. *Creating a greater awareness amongst key institutions of how the needs of older and disabled people can be met through better research.* Of the 16 respondents, five were tentative (“not sure”, “a little”, “hopefully”, “probably”). Others were positive but unsure about the identity of the key institutions. Where these institutions were research bodies then the objective had been achieved, but the influence on government and industry was tentative, reflecting the “long time needed to put a new field on the map”. However there was a view that some government departments and professional institutions had been influenced “as evidenced by their sponsorship of some events and the attendance of senior people” and through the impact of “external and internal publicity” as well as through advocacy from the Director of the Network.
4. *Direct interaction with those who influence and make policies concerning the quality of the environment in which people live.* The responses in most cases reflected respondents involvement with workshop activities. Responses from seven were tentative (“no”, “not sure”, “don’t know”, “too early”, “not a major outcome”) and there was a view that the workshops “needed to be attended by politicians” and “senior national policy makers”. However, two respondents did give specific examples of where they thought workshops had influenced the policy makers who had attended (for example, the Audit Commission and ODPM), others mentioned that two workshops had been hosted by

government organisations and another mentioned the influence of the Network outside of the workshops, through committee work of Network members and advocacy directly to policy makers.

5. *Creating a better platform for the application and dissemination of current research.* All 15 respondents were supportive: “the workshops have definitely provided this”, “evidenced by highly successful workshops”, “shortened the time from publication in the academic press to influencing policy”, “although would have happened through other meetings not in the same focused way that the workshops were able to achieve”, “created a very useful focus for research in this area”, although one considered that “the emphasis had been on dissemination and less on getting directly through to those who apply”.
6. *Encouraging high quality research.* Comments ranged from “doubtful”, “has not focussed on research development issues” and a view that the Network had “not done anything about the bandwagon of those who work and publish under a convenient label sbut do not ultimately benefit disabled people” to a predominant view that quality had been enhanced through “peer scrutiny”, “learning from others”, “demonstration of best practice”, “encouragement to place research in a broader context”, and the “opportunity to explore (the format of) future research collaborations”.

Other Achievements

Eight respondents identified other achievements of the Network. Some considered the benefits to their own work: “improved profile for the application of technology to the challenges of an ageing population”, “highly visible contact points”, “many spin offs – appointment to prestigious committees”, “continuing overtures to become involved with significant activities”, “has enabled further funding for research – from industry”. Others commented on the processes and operation of the Network: “the way in which it has brought together a very forward thinking and committed body of researchers”, “provided advice and support for isolated research groups”, “created a sense of community and belonging”, “immensely important for RAs to interact with others”, “very cost effective and it is important to those with limited funds that attendance is free”, “the network is a model of best practice”.

The Future

Fifteen respondents offered a range of advice about the future of the Network, some of which was extensive and much of which related to EPSRC’s future support for ageing research rather than the activities of the Network, although both are intertwined. There was a single view that “the Network was not required by experienced researchers although it could encourage and support younger researchers” and another that it was of “little benefit in terms of my work and focus”.

Others felt that “as a mechanism for proselytising the EQUAL research philosophy it had successfully run its course” and proposed a transformation into “the formation of strategic research partnerships” and “an expert panel which aimed to be informed about policy and the public” as well as “a think-tank for informing future funding programmes”. In this respect there were suggestions that the Network “extend its remit to cover work undertaken by the NDA programme”.

But the majority view was that “the Network has a role to play”, “it should continue” and be “developed further” “especially if there are no further rounds of EQUAL

funding”. The Network was “an essential focal point for those working in the area” and was needed to support on-going EQUAL funded projects.

Certainly there were concerns that the Network could not “live on just goodwill” and needed more secure funding perhaps with contributions from industry and professional institutions. One respondent suggested that if it were to cease it should be replaced by “a substantial biannual conference interfacing with the international community”.

Summary

The findings of the survey reveal strong support and interest in the Network from most of the respondents who mostly have engaged with its activities. Clearly most considered that they and their research had benefited from the Network. There was a very large measure of support for the view that the Network had achieved its objectives of developing the embryonic network which existed in 2001 and in engaging a wider community of interest. Also they suggest that it has performed very well in two of its focus areas – developing a platform for application and dissemination, and encouraging high quality research.

Whilst the predominant view was that it had performed well in the two other focus areas this was tempered by concerns about the extent to which key institutions and policy makers had been involved. The views about these two areas of focus are easily corroborated by the great difficulty experienced in attracting representatives of government departments to workshops, although there is a handful of very keen supporters, and from mainstream industry. Nevertheless, the workshops have attracted good attendance from key people in charities, voluntary organisations, social and health services and the social housing sector. The limited involvement of government with the workshops has been compensated to some extent by direct advocacy of EQUAL, especially to senior politicians and government officials. However, despite some important successes this has not been easy.

Respondents’ views about the future suggest that whilst the Network is valuable and should continue its environment and the challenges have moved on. On the one hand there may be a need to rethink the extent to which the Network supports scientific developments and integration to underpin new research proposals and the application of research findings. On the other hand there may be a need for greater involvement of users and policy makers.

5. Feedback from members

The most active members of the Network have been those who have attended workshops and so it is most appropriate to review their views on the Network rather than to undertake a review of all those who have joined the Network, some of whom have little experience or knowledge of its activities. Further, given that the opinions of the workshops and the Network in general have been regularly sought from workshop participants, probably their views provide a good representation and insight into those of the broad membership. As these opinions have been analysed and discussed thoroughly in the annual reports of the Network rather than to repeat that material this section on feedback from members provides a commentary on that feedback.

At each event participants have been asked to complete a simple questionnaire about the workshop and to offer advice on the organisation of future workshops. Six aspects of each workshop have been scored on a simple 1 to 6 scale (very poor, poor, unsure, good, very good, excellent) and these have been supplemented with open-ended comments.

The numbers of participants at each workshop, grouped by background, are given in Figure 1. The average scores for each of: the usefulness of the workshop, quality of presentations, opportunities for networking, are summarised in Figure 2 and those for venue, catering and administration are in Figure 3.

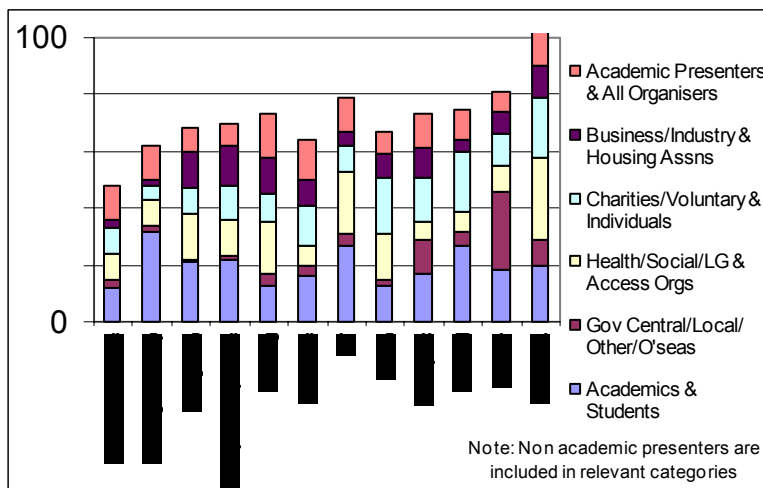


Figure 1: Numbers of Participants in Workshops (arranged in chronological order)

Although the average satisfaction scores have varied, typically over 95% of the participants have rated any aspect of a workshop as at least good, and over 70% have rated them as very good or excellent.

Events have been judged *useful* for a variety of reasons but especially both because of the opportunity to hear about the latest research and developments and through the chance to meet people with similar interests, albeit from a different background – as a user or staff of a voluntary organisation or professional or academic. Many participants have made new contacts for their work and some have enjoyed renewing friendships from previous events. Some participants have specifically said that they have planned to work together in the future, and certainly have. There has often been comment about the enjoyment or ‘buzz’ of a workshop. Participants from across all groups have regularly commented that they could only attend because there has not been a charge. Not only has this comment been made by older and disabled people who have attended, often as representatives of local voluntary groups, and by hard-up researchers, but by many professionals in the public services, especially in the health service. Yet often the greatest beneficiaries of workshops have been those who work directly with older people, such as Occupational Therapists, who have valued the ability to get up to date and to find out about what developments might lie round the corner.

The comments on *presentations* have varied, of course. But frequently they have been about the value of hearing about work at the ‘cutting edge’ and that they have been thought provoking. Very few presentations have received negative evaluations although with such a broad audience it has been difficult to pitch some presentation so as to be ‘right’ for everyone, but despite many presentations being about research there have been few comments about presentations being too scientific or laden with jargon. This is not because the content has been watered down, but rather the context of the science, quality of life, has supported quite complex expositions. The balance of speakers from mainly academic backgrounds but also from voluntary organisations, government departments, private practice and, occasionally, individual users has been found interesting. When users have presented, their credibility and first hand experience has been greatly valued.

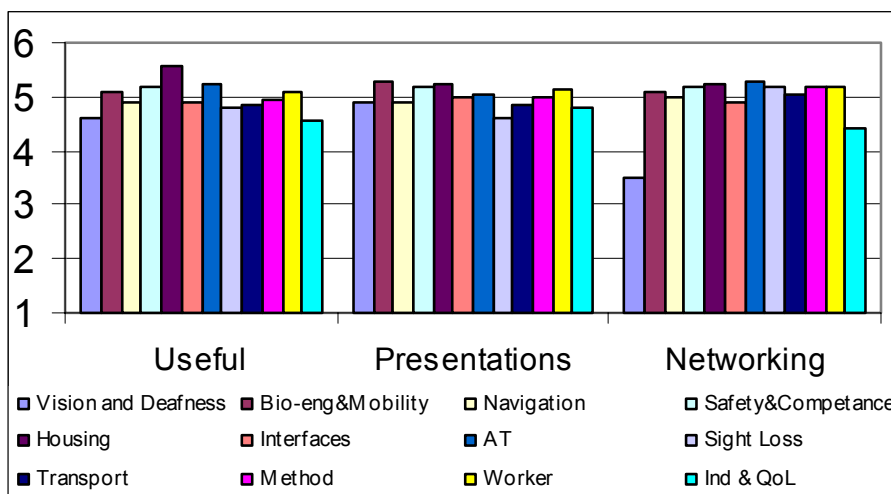


Fig. 2. Participants’ Evaluation of Workshops (average scores) (Scores. 1 – very poor, 2 – poor, 3 – unsure, 4 – good, 5 – very good, 6 – excellent)

Workshops have been criticised sometimes for having too many items in a day’s programme, especially by those unaccustomed to day long events, but academics and professional people, many of whom travel long distances to the workshops, value a full day event. On the very occasions when we have had breakout groups, as always some have gone well but others less so. The few times when we have had poster or other displays and demonstrations, these have been greatly welcomed and have stimulated networking and workshop discussion.

There have been universally appreciative comments about *opportunities to network* as people have made and renewed useful contacts from such varied backgrounds, all with a specific interest in the workshop topic. Young researchers have found it supportive to be in a large crowd of academics and others who have understood their interest, when they may be rather a lone voice in their institution. Experienced researchers have valued the opportunity to meet practitioners and users and report that they have followed up and in some cases have eventually worked with some of these contacts. Long coffee and lunch breaks have been programmed for this purpose, but some participants would like them even longer – a difficult balance to make. There have been requests that more people from industry and central government should attend. Although every effort has been made to increase participation of these groups, with some success, ageing and disability issues are not yet central to their concerns.

The *venues* have been very varied – wherever EQUAL has been invited and the host could afford to pay the cost. It is difficult for universities, which have to count every penny, to host events and we have operated with a range of facilities. Sometimes the delegates, who may be used to smarter venues at conferences for which a fee is paid, have not understood the resource constraints and have commented adversely on rather basic university facilities. At the other end of the scale we have run events in some very grand venues – smart hotels and country houses. Whilst these have been much enjoyed, along with university venues they have sometimes been criticised for lack of accessibility, usually justifiably. Advanced planning visits to the sites have always addressed accessibility needs and these have been catered for as much as the site and building and forethought have allowed. Occasional problems with signposting or parking have been picked up. Sound amplification has sometimes been a problem.

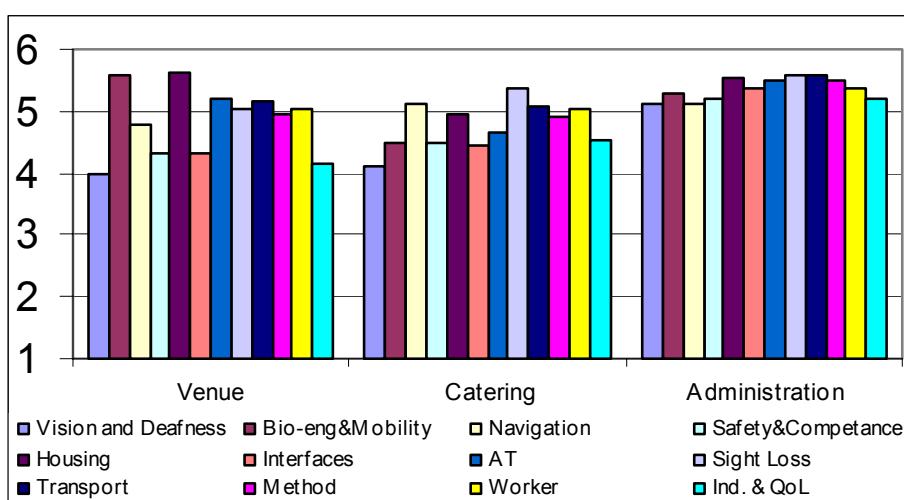


Fig. 3. Participants’ Evaluation of Administrative Aspects (average scores)

Catering has had to be within a tight budget as we have relied on the hosts and sponsors to provide the catering. Most of the participants have travelled a distance, so drinks and a pastry on arrival has been welcomed. The buffet style lunch has kept down costs and allowed people to mingle. We have had varied feedback on the food, usually reasonably good, with some specific comments from vegetarians – on labelling, especially when their food has looked so tasty that other people have got to eat it first!

Administration has always achieved a very good rating. The email circulation list is seen as friendly and informative, but not troubling members too frequently. The travel and accommodation information for each national workshop posted in the website is valued. Those who have written to say that they are not free to attend often comment on how useful it is to know they can see the powerpoint presentations afterwards on the web site. Participants have enjoyed the friendly welcome at the workshop reception table and being introduced to other relevant people, the comprehensive workshop packs which include a list of participants including email addresses (individuals’ permission having been obtained for this). Some extra relevant flyers have been found useful. Arrangements to send very full details in advance to those with a visual or hearing impairments, according to their specifications, have been appreciated.

Respondents have also made many *general comments* about how workshops could be improved, from somewhat unrealistic requests given the limited budget (for example, to have handouts of every presentation available on the day, or even in advance – but they can be downloaded from the web site a few days afterwards) to helpful suggestions for future workshop topics. Requests for more discussion time have featured regularly. It is a tricky balance between enough good speakers presenting, programmed discussion time after these talks and break times for individuals network. It has to be added, that after each event there have always been some comments which simply say “Keep up the good work”.

Final Comment

This brief review, informed in part by the annual reports, suggests that feedback from members has been overwhelmingly supportive whilst nevertheless identifying opportunities for improvement and enhancement. Expectations of participants from all backgrounds have been high but have differed creating both encouragement and challenges. Given the range of criticisms which could be levelled by a mixed audience towards predominantly research focussed events the high levels of satisfaction expressed suggest that workshops have been successful in meeting a wide range of needs. Indeed, the feedback suggests that the workshops have contributed significantly to meeting the two objectives of the Network.