

## Researching in a new university

As part of my job as a HE initial teacher education tutor, I want to be involved with research in mathematics education. But I work in a new university which, following the last national Research Assessment Exercise, receives no funding for educational research from the Higher Education Funding Council. So what can I do?

I have been in this position for a number of years and have gained enormously from my engagement with mathematics education research. This engagement has been the biggest single impetus to exploring, understanding, changing and developing my own practice as a tutor; has been the thing which probably has contributed most effectively to initiating and sustaining professional contact with mathematics education tutors at other HEIs; and, especially when linked to our common teaching experiences, has been the most exciting way of working with colleagues within my own institution.

### What kinds of strategies make this possible?

First, in terms of networking, I have found being a member of BSRLM<sup>1</sup> and attending the termly day conferences very rewarding. Research reports are shared at the day conferences. There is a conjecturing and inclusive response to contributions, which is very supportive for newcomers, and there is often an opportunity to meet and talk to people who before have just been names in books.

Second, and most important, one of the privileges of working in initial teacher education is that the opportunities it provides for researching your own practice are more easily accessed than in school. From early on I asked the students to write reflectively about a whole range of experiences. Sometimes this would be as part of their assessed work, sometimes as preparation for teaching sessions at the university, sometimes as a significant contribution to evaluating individual modules or the course more widely. Often, I would ask their permission to work with their writing beyond its initial purpose and I have always found them willing to allow this. Such writing offers feedback to me about my practices as a tutor and also, from time to time, has offered me the opportunity in turn to write reflectively myself about my own practice. *Mathematics Education Review*<sup>2</sup> is a journal specifically intended to carry such reports and articles submitted are supportively and helpfully reviewed. Fairly early on in my engagement with research I had an article accepted which encouraged me to continue investigating, reflecting, writing and reporting.

Third, I was able to engage in doctoral study part time. In common with colleagues at many similar HEIs, I had my fees paid for me. I found studying for a PhD enormously demanding in terms of time and I wouldn't necessarily recommend this pathway to everyone. I gained tremendously from the experience but it certainly knocks over the work-life balance. There are now a growing number of HEIs which offer doctoral study through an EdD and current reports from colleagues suggest that the structured and staged aspects of a professional doctorate, coupled with the fact that you are part of a clear cohort, may make such study slightly more manageable.

Most recently, I have also been joining in the activities of the Critical Mathematics Education Group<sup>3</sup>. This is a much smaller and more intimate forum and one which is much more focused on research issues in themselves – for example, what kind of knowledge do different research methodologies produce? The intention is to provide a supportive environment in which one can try out complex, unfamiliar and tentative ideas. This has encouraged me, along with a colleague, to extend the work with our own students to include some extended interviews. Working with a colleague has made it much more possible to prioritise collecting the data, discussing the outcomes, contributing to in-house debates about all aspects of our practice, and writing and reporting the work.

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<sup>1</sup> BSRLM <http://www.bsrlm.org.uk>

<sup>2</sup> Mathematics Education Review is published by AMET

<http://www.edweb.co.uk/amet/amet.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.shu.ac.uk/schools/ed/merg/index.html>

Finally, there are some opportunities to bid for very modest funds to support researching your own practice. For example, the TTA run one or two such schemes. Working at a new university, like all academic colleagues, I have a small amount of time set aside annually as part of my contract for research and scholarly activity. The smallness of the funds available means that I have never been able to use them to create more time than this for my research but small grants provide the opportunity to cover research expenses, to travel to visit other colleagues and to support the dissemination process through conferences, workshops and so on.