

IS1202 COST Activity Report

Event Type: Training School
Title: Theoretical & Methodological Approaches to Virtual Work
Location: Valletta, Malta
Dates: 16th – 20th September 2013
MC Organisers: Vili Lehdonvirta, Mark Micallef

Overview

The objective of this training school was to prepare doctoral students and postdocs from a variety of disciplines to carry out successful research in the cross-disciplinary field of virtual work studies. Virtual work is a multi-faceted phenomenon: in addition to one's own disciplinary background, successful researchers must also understand key contributions from neighbouring disciplines. In this training school, participants were exposed to content which enabled them to obtain grounding in the most important theoretical perspectives whilst also receiving instruction in cutting-edge methodological approaches. Participants were given the chance to present their own work, network with other emerging scholars and some of the preeminent scholars in the field. A career workshop was also held, where participants collaboratively created a digital resource on publishing and funding opportunities for early-stage research on virtual work. Along with ample lecturing and networking opportunities, attendees also spent an afternoon at HSBC's UK Call Centre in Malta, where they were given a tour of the premises and given the opportunity to interview the call centre's manager at length from various theoretical perspectives.

Interest and participation

The training school was advertised amongst MC members, partner institutions and relevant mailing lists. This generated 69 applications for the training school which were subsequently filtered down to 21 funded places. The selection process involved a simple process whereby (1) applicants were asked to submit an overview of their work and research interests, (2) two reviewers independently scored each applicant based on the school's relevancy to their research on a scale of 0 (not relevant), 1 (somewhat relevant) and 2 (highly relevant). The top 21 applicants were then selected, with preference for gender and geographic diversity when scores were tied.

We also opened up the training school to a maximum of five participants who were willing to attend at their own expense. This resulted in a further six applications.

Two trainers (Prof. Jörg Flecker and Dr John Horton) attended the training school whilst Dr Marko Hakonen successfully delivered a session over Skype due to last minute medical issues that prevented him from travelling. Dr Vili Lehdonvirta, Dr Christina Scharff and Dr Adam Fish attended as early-stage researchers, but delivered sessions in their respective areas of expertise.

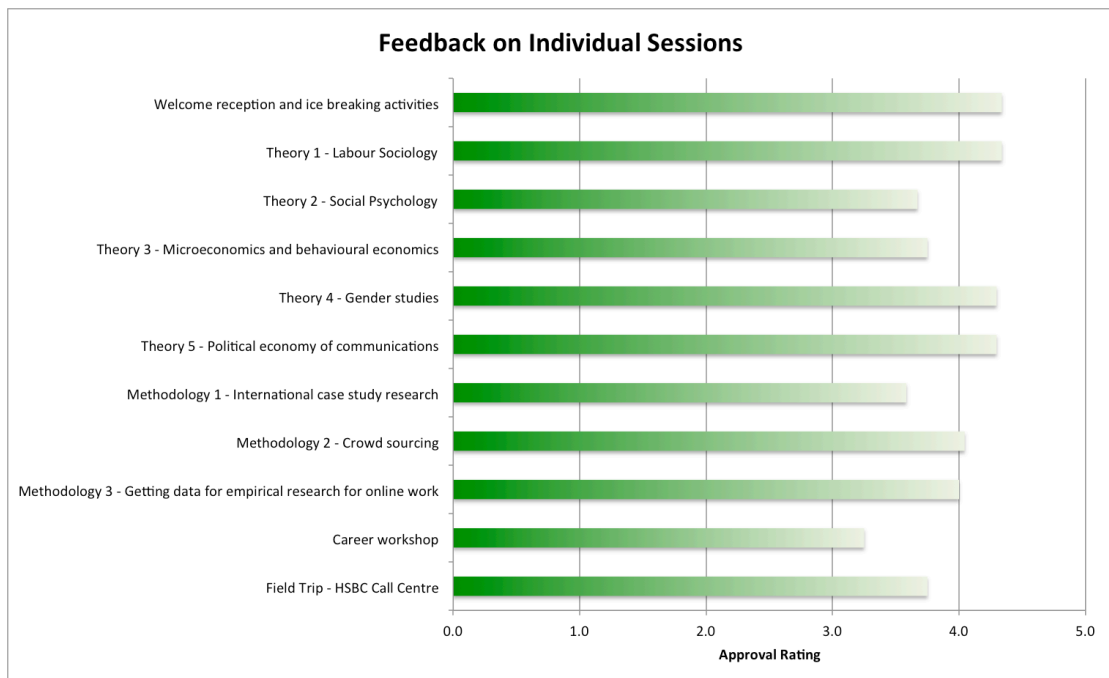
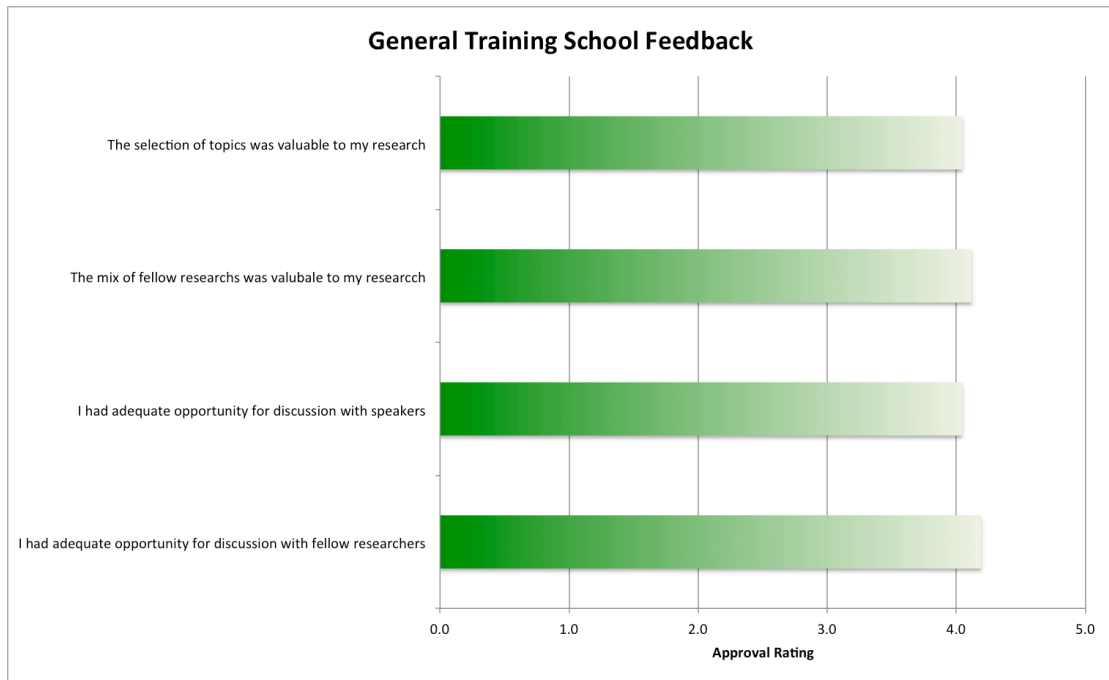
Structure of Training School

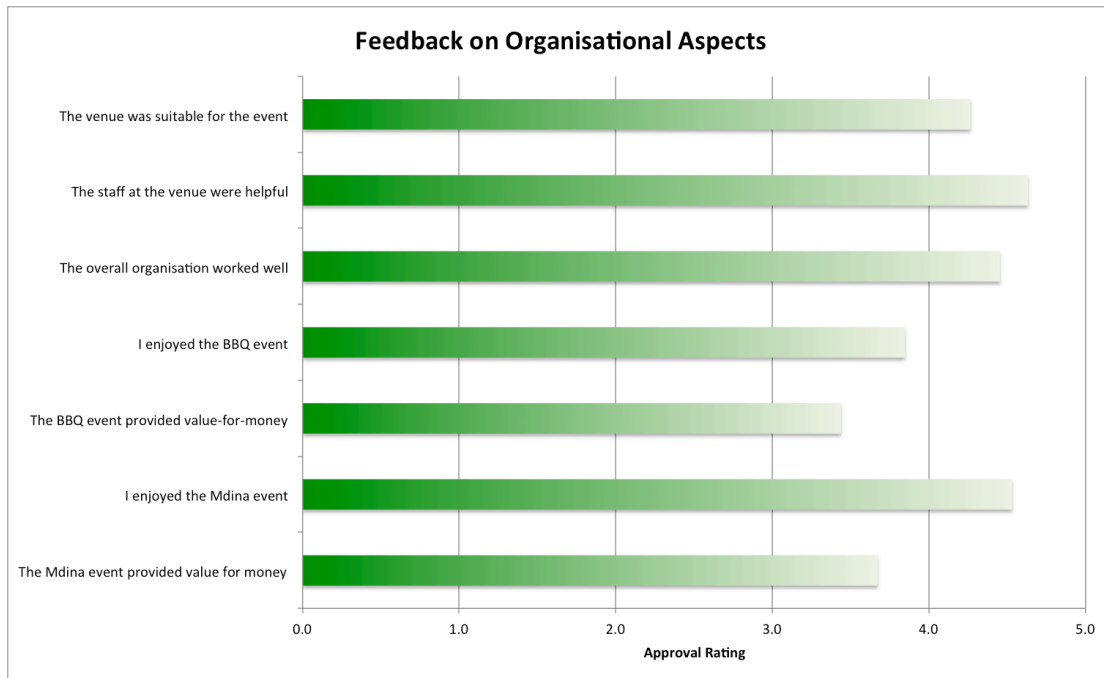
The training school consisted of four types of sessions:

1. **Theoretical sessions** which provided a theoretical in various topics of interest in the study of virtual work. These topics consisted of labour sociology, social psychology, micro & behavioural economics, gender studies and finally the political economy of communications.
2. **Methodological sessions** introduced participants to various methodological aspects involved in the study of virtual work. These consisted of international case study research, crowd sourcing and getting data for empirical research for online work.
3. **Voluntary participant presentations** were a mechanism by which participants could expose their research to colleagues and solicited valuable feedback. 17 participants opted to give 15 minute talks about their research.
4. A **career workshop** was held in which participants discussed and brainstormed publication opportunities, collaboration opportunities and ideas for boosting their careers in the study of virtual work.
5. Finally, participants went on a **visit to HSBC's UK Call Centre** which is based in Malta. The field trip consisted of (1) a briefing with Vili Lehdonvirta in which participants were prepared for the field trip in that they were asked to apply theoretical knowledge in the analysis of what they would see on the field trip, (2) a guided tour of the call centre, (3) the opportunity to question the call centre's manager at length about the inner workings of the centre, and finally (4) a debrief whereby participants discussed their observations in relation to theoretical perspectives of virtual work.

Participant Feedback

Participants were asked to fill in an online feedback survey after the training school was concluded. Using a Likert Scale, we asked them to rate their level of agreement/satisfaction with three aspects of the training school: (1) the overall training school, (2) individual sessions, and (3) organisational aspects. The graphs below indicate the approval ratings in each category.





The charts indicate a very positive overall rating for every aspect the training school. Participants were also invited to provide written feedback to individual trainers, as a courtesy to the trainers. This feedback will be communicated to the trainers on an individual basis.

Recommendations for future events

In questions [in the survey](#) where participants were given free reign to express any recommendations for future workshops, the theme of time management was repeatedly mentioned as an area for improvement. In retrospect, the time table for the training school was tightly packed with little room for error. While the schedule held and no significant overruns happened on any day, the careful time management required on the part of organizers to make this happen may at times have created an atmosphere of haste and lack of flexibility. We recommend that future events provide generous buffers in the timetable to allow for overrunning presentations, ad-hoc changes and prolonged discussions during coffee breaks and lunch.

From an administrative point of view, there was also some confusion with participants contacting different organisers (Mark, Vili, Ursula, Kaire) since there were two websites with two different sets of contact details (the Action's website and the event website under the University of Malta site). This resulted in some instances of inefficient communication with all the consequences associated with such a situation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we feel that whilst these oversights were made and the resulting lessons learned, the very positive ratings as well as the organizers' own observations suggest that this IS1202 training school was highly successful and achieved [its](#) stated aims. We would like to conclude by quoting feedback from one participant which we feel encapsulates the spirit of the training school:

*"I just want to say a big THANK YOU for all organizers of the training school!
Honestly, creating an atmosphere where hard work goes hand in hand with fun and
everybody smiling and having good time and inspiring thoughts for future research is
remarkable achievement!!!"*
