

Q-Step Alumni Network Scoping Workshop Summary report

A survey of Q-Step students and graduates early in 2018 demonstrated considerable interest in establishing an alumni network.

In March 2018, following the survey, we held an initial scoping workshop at University of Glasgow. Around 40 students / graduates representing most of the Q-Step Centres participated. The delegates explored their own experiences of Q-Step and what it means to be a Q-Step student /graduate. They explored with us the possibilities of establishing an alumni network, including how this might be practically managed and what it might most usefully do or provide for its members.

This report summarises the main views and ideas arising from the initial scoping workshop.

The Q-Step Experience

Learning and Practice

37 participants described what they felt worked well in terms of learning and practice on their Q-Step programme. Statements were grouped together under common themes. The table shows the most commonly mentioned examples of positive learning experience and the number of students that referred to each of these.

What worked well?

Positive learning experience	Number of references
Community - including communication, team work, peer to peer learning and community of common interest	36
Experience and employability – developing employability practical / applied learning including on placement / employability	23
Building confidence and understanding – including generally but also specifically in relation to using / analysing data	21
Specific skills including research design, working with Excel and SPSS	18
Good teaching / support – including inspirational teaching and good academic support	14

What didn't work well?

Negative learning experience	Number of references
Issues with course structure / content – including lack of module options, gaps in provision, irrelevance	26
Extent of challenge – including steep learning curve, fast pace, complex subject matter, assumption of prior knowledge	13
Lack of support – including from staff and from peers	12

Motivations for choosing a Q-Step pathway

Participants' reasons for choosing Q-Step fell into three categories: **employability, exploring particular interests, and personal challenge.**

The most commonly cited motivation was employability. This included gaining a labour market advantage, accessing opportunities and experience (eg placements) and establishing connections and contacts.

The next most commonly cited motivation was exploring particular interests including maths, data, social sciences, and tackling social inequality.

Several participants cited personal reasons for choosing Q-Step. These included personal challenge, doing something worthwhile (making a contribution to the world) and wanting to try something a bit different.

Personal reflection of overall Q-Step experience and achievements

Participants reflected on their overall experience of Q-Step. Almost all described overcoming initial fears, meeting the challenge and working through difficulties in order to develop confidence. This seems to be the quintessential Q-Step experience.

Participants also reflected on their achievements on the programme. These achievements are wide-ranging and impressive. Some examples are provided below under themed headings:

Publications and presentations

- Publication of a report on the impact of Citizens Advice on public health which resulted in increased funding for CAB from NHS
- Publications in academic journals
- Presenting research via civil service GSR
- Report published by the Government Statistical Service in its Methodology Bulletin

Course completion / attainment

- Persevering with the course
- Completing data research project
- Graduating at the top of the cohort
- Getting a social science degree
- Completing SQM course
- Getting onto a Masters programme because of Q-Step experience
- Winning SAGE QM prize for dissertation
- Getting a scholarship to ICPSR summer school at University of Michigan
- Getting a First for dissertation

Confidence

- Developing confidence to pursue research interest
- Developing confidence in statistics
- Developing enough confidence to set up peer support helping other students
- Developing confidence in areas that were previously a challenge
- Overcoming a fear of data
- Pushing myself out of my comfort zone and proving that I can cope

Skills

- Learning new quants methods
- Developing strong social science skills
- Developing real quants skills having previously struggled with stats
- Being able to code
- Learning to use RStudio, MYSQL and Python

- Developing QGIS skills
- Ability to apply quants training to various aspects of life and work
- Learning how to use SPSS

Successful placement

- Strong contribution on placement in real world work situation
- Applying skills to real research on placement
- Internship in the UK Data Archive – the first UG student for some time
- Worked for a data science company
- Successful placement at You Gov
- Work on placement helped inform strategic planning in relation to domestic violence helplines
- Receiving an award for placement performance
- Strong contribution to project on placement at Demos
- Placement project at the Office for National Statistics
- Contributing to impact measurement of an educational charity while on placement

Employment / employability

- Got a researcher job at YouGov
- Built a network of contacts through internship
- Gained experience and expertise to refer to in job interviews

Advising prospective Q-Step students

Participants considered how they would encourage prospective students to choose Q-Step pathways. Some of their suggestions are below.

Students should choose Q-Step because...

- it enhances employability and helps you stand out from other graduates
- it offers excellent placement opportunities
- it is accessible even if you don't like or aren't great at maths
- it will enhance their skills for PG study
- it puts the science into social science
- it's a great community to be part of
- you get to do real research independently
- it opens up opportunities you didn't know existed
- you might surprise yourself
- you can make a difference

Shaping an alumni network

The workshop participants considered the sorts of activities and services that a Q-Step alumni network could / should provide. They worked in five small groups. The table below shows suggested activities / services by the number of groups which suggested them:

Number of groups	Suggested activity / service
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual or quarterly conference
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training programmes including Advanced Methods workshops and boot-camps • Student funding including bursaries for undergraduates, Q-Step funded scholarships for PG and a Q-Step research fund • Social / networking events

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notification of jobs and training opportunities • Merchandise (eg hoodies / apparel etc)
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Q-Step social media • Summer / weekend programmes • Q Step journal • Q-Step blog • Cross institution networking
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Q-Step website • Mentoring scheme • Networking with employers • Research clusters / forums by topic • Internships • Annual research competition • Alumni in schools – mentoring and raising awareness etc • Data Camp subscription for all alumni
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Q-Step app • Career building support – self-presentation etc • Peer support • International links • Methods Directory • Reviews of employers • Sharing contact details • Q Step Centre reps • Database / repository of datasets • Guide for new 1st year students • Links to Coursera programmes • Methods Group • TED talks

Contributing to Alumni Network activities

The participants engaged in an exercise investigating the sorts of activities they would be prepared to contribute to or manage as part of an alumni network. There were a series of pledges which participants were asked to consider and then indicate the likelihood or otherwise of making a personal contribution. The main pledges are featured in the table below.

Pledge	Most likely	Likely	Least likely	Unlikely
Networking events / conference	19	14	0	4
Research / Journal	15	15	0	7
App	18	10	4	5
Website / online platforms	19	18	0	0
Hosting placements for students	6	27	0	4

Conclusions

The Q-Step experience

1. There are some strong and seemingly quite common positive features that characterise a Q-Step experience. These include elements such as a sense of community; good teaching and support; an element of personal challenge; the tangible development of skills and confidence; and a practical focus on employability.

2. The positive features that Q-Step students mention when describing their experiences coincide with their reasons for opting for Q-Step programmes in the first place. This suggests that to perhaps a significant extent expectations are being met.
3. The achievements of Q-Step students can be impressive. They include the publication of research papers, winning academic prizes, securing good employment opportunities, and notable successes on placements.

NB. It is important to note that workshop participants were selected by their institutions and gave up their free time to attend. They were therefore perhaps quite likely to be positive about the programme and possibly likely also to be amongst the higher achieving students from the overall Q-Step population.

A Q-Step alumni network

4. There seems to be **considerable support for establishing an alumni network**
5. Some fairly clear ideas emerged in terms of establishing the sorts of activities that an alumni network might most usefully offer. There was considerable agreement around two types of activity in particular: **conferences/events and online/ social media engagement.**
6. These were also the two types of activity that participants felt most strongly that they would actively contribute towards
7. There was popular support for events including an **annual conference and also skills training/ development opportunities**
8. There was popular support for establishing an **alumni website, blog and journal**
9. Other interesting ideas that were less commonly mentioned include an alumni network app; a peer support / mentoring programme; a datasets repository; and the development of international links.