Training Needs Analysis and Skills Development

In this task, we will consider training needs and how these may be addressed. We will use a scenario to help you think about the issues and develop your understanding of what is involved in training needs analysis and the use of the Doctoral Development Programme (DDP).

This scenario draws on the aggregated experiences of past students in this university, but is itself entirely fictitious.

Please read the following scenario, and then consider the questions.
**Joseph’s Diary:**

**October 1:** Had my first supervisory meeting today with Dr Martin and Professor White, and we spent most of the meeting doing what’s called a Training Needs Analysis. The TNA is a way to identify any development needs that I have as a doctoral student, so we can decide if I need to do any courses as part of the Doctoral Development Programme. It was a very long form! Dr Martin read out each question and I had to say how competent I was in it. About halfway through I mentioned I’d got a Master’s degree so had done some research methods training. Professor White said, ‘Oh well, in that case you’ll know all the basics’, and Dr Martin just ticked most of the ‘competent’ boxes from there on. They said they’d have a discussion and tell me if they think I need to do any DDP courses this year.

**October 15:** Got an e-mail from Dr Martin saying I need to sign up for two courses for the DDP. I could register on-line but I needed to act immediately as they were MSc units and had already begun. I’ve just registered: one is an information literacy course which covers all sorts of stuff; the other is on data analysis.

**November 15:** I’ve been busy with two training courses, and they seem to be taking a lot of time that I’d prefer to use to get on with my literature review. Whilst sounding great on paper, they’ve turned out to be of little relevance to my research. One is very basic and covers stuff I’ve read and done as a Master’s student. The data analysis one is about computer software packages for analysing data. I don’t have any data yet, so it seems a little hard to relate to my work.

**December 7:** I’ve just had a supervisory meeting and I’m feeling a little stunned. I presented the first part of my literature review to my supervisors and basically their comment was that I didn’t seem to know what I was supposed to be doing. They were expecting a much more systematic approach, whereas I’ve been using a sort of ‘snowball’ method where references in one paper lead me to another. So it’s back to square one and I seem to have wasted two months. By the way, I’ve dropped out of both those training courses as they were not useful. I told my supervisors and they didn’t seem too happy, but accepted my decision.
Reflective Questions

Now read the following questions, using them to reflect upon your thoughts and feelings as you read Joseph’s diary. There are no right or wrong responses: this is an opportunity to think more deeply about setting training objectives, and perhaps relate it to your own ideas about or experiences of training. After you have written your thoughts, you can see what the tutor has commented on each question.

Please answer these questions before reading on in this task.

Q1. Do you think this was a good use of the Training Needs Analysis?

Q2. What was the problem with the process of selecting Joseph’s DDP courses?

Q3. What might Joseph have done differently during the first term to improve the quality of his studies?
Tutor’s Comments on the reflective questions

Compare what you have written about Joseph with the tutor’s thoughts on the questions.

Q1. Do you think this was a good use of the Training Needs Analysis?

There were a number of problems with how Joseph used the TNA. Firstly, it’s not a good idea to try to complete the form in a supervisory meeting: it needs reflection and is best completed by the doctoral student (on paper or online using Pebblepad software). Then the completed form can be basis for the first supervision meeting. Secondly, don’t assume that an MSc will have provided all the research and skills training needed for a doctorate. Students may have gained various skills at Master’s level, but they may not have been studied in sufficient detail or may benefit form revision anyway. Third, the TNA is not a one-off event: it needs to be reviewed at least once a year.

Q2. What was the problem with the process of selecting Joseph’s DDP courses?

Supervisors should not dictate what training a student needs. This needs to be negotiated between student and supervisors, discussing the needs in the light of the TNA as a whole, and options for training courses agreed. Supervisors will have experience in what courses are available and what skills they impart, so there input is essential.

In this case, neither course was right for Joseph. One was too basic, the other too advanced for the stage of work he was currently undertaking. It was also probably inadvisable to expect Joseph to take two courses in his first term. Training needs to be spread throughout the doctoral study period.

Dropping out of courses is not a good idea: it is a waste of your time and the course tutor’s. Failure to complete a course could also be a negative marker when it comes to the confirmation meeting at the end of the first year, although in Joseph’s case, he would be able to provide good explanations of why he did not complete them.

Q3. What might Joseph have done differently during the first term to improve the quality of his studies?

The one area that Joseph needed immediate skills upgrade was the literature review. Neither he nor his supervisors identified a lack of skills and knowledge (perhaps because it was assumed he had gained these skills in his MSc), and so not only did he make a false start to this review but he was spending time on unsuitable DDP work. If he had taken a literature
review training course in his first term, this would have addressed this shortcoming and provided a much better start to his studies.

Think about the issues raised by these reflections on Joseph’s account of training needs analysis and the DDP during the first year of his doctorate. Are they similar to your own experiences, or have you had different issues to address? How can you best use the DDP to gain the skills you need?

Now read the second part of this scenario, which describes the second term of Joseph’s doctorate.
Joseph’s Diary

January 15: Over the holidays I’ve been thinking about what went wrong last term concerning the training courses I took. I’ve decided to be more pro-active and get back on track. I’ve downloaded the TNA form and gone through it myself, which is what I should have done in the first place, rather than in a supervisory meeting. I decided to be absolutely honest about my skills, and with a few months experience of a doctorate I have a better idea of what I need to do anyway.

January 22: I met with Dr Martin today (Professor White is away) and told him about doing the TNA again. I said I need to get skills in four areas: literature review (pretty obvious after last term); critical appraisal and writing skills; statistical analysis; and a particular innovative method of data analysis that I read about in the journals and would like to try to use in my project. Dr Martin agreed and suggested I went away and looked for DDP courses I could take. I feel like things are getting better.

February 7: Fantastic day today. With Dr Martin’s agreement I’ve enrolled for a great course on literature review and critical appraisal, and what’s more it’s online so I can fit it around my research work. I’m just going to do this one course this term. I’ve found courses in statistical analysis and writing skills, but I’m going to leave these for now, till I’m closer to needing these skills in my second and third years. The one problem is the specialist methods course. No one in the University knows about this, and there is definitely not a course. I’ll talk it over with Dr Martin.

April 20: The good news is that my literature review just got approval from my supervisors, thanks mostly to the training course, which was just what I needed. I’ve also found a short course in the specialist methods, at the University of Lancaster. Professor White knows the person running it and I am going to be able to do it next autumn.

June 7: The literature review course is finished and I’ve updated my TNA online using Pebblepad. I’m going to do a further TNA in September to make sure I have the skills I need for the data collection and analysis phase of the doctorate. I know a lot more now about what’s involved in doing doctoral research, so I’m sure I’m going to spot a few more holes in my competencies.
Reflective Questions

Now read the following questions, and again use them to reflect upon your thoughts and feelings as you read Joseph’s diary. After you have written your thoughts, you can see what the tutor has commented on each question.

Q4. What has enabled Joseph to use the TNA and DDP courses more effectively in the second term?

Q5. Has Joseph got the balance right between doing his doctoral research and undertaking research training for the DDP?

Q7. Is Joseph right to continue to review his training needs?
Tutor’s Comments on the reflective questions

Compare what you have written about Joseph with the tutor’s thoughts on the questions.

**Q4. What has enabled Joseph to use TNA and DDP courses more effectively in the second term?**

Joseph took control over his own skills development. He used the TNA form to thoughtfully reflect on his current level of skills and knowledge and how these need to be upgraded to meet the demands of a doctoral programme.

With the advice of his supervisors, he has chosen a single DDP training course that is relevant to his current stage of studies, and can provide skills that he can use as he completes his literature review. He has also identified courses to take in the future, including one non-standard training course offered by another university. The DDP is designed to build in flexibility of training to meet individual student needs.

**Q5. Has Joseph got the balance right between doing his doctoral research and undertaking research training for the DDP?**

Joseph is now undertaking a manageable level of DDP training, and is planning to spread this out over the course of his doctorate. A doctorate is about research training, so the DDP is a valuable element of the degree. However, the award of the doctorate depends upon completing a satisfactory thesis, so the balance of time allocated to DDP and research needs to be satisfactory. Your supervisors can advise on how to get this balance right, and see also the training materials on project and time management in this programme.

**Q6. Is Joseph right to continue to review his training needs?**

Yes, and in fact this is the expectation of the University of Sheffield. Training needs analysis should be an on-going element of doctoral studies, and the Pebblepad software has been devised to enables students and supervisors to review and revise the TNA throughout a doctorate.

Think about your reflections and the tutor’s comments. Are you using training needs analysis and the DDP effectively to enhance your doctoral research? Could you benefit from reviewing your skills at this point in your doctorate?
Some Final Thoughts

Having read these scenarios, and reflected on the questions and the tutor’s comments, we hope you have gained a better picture of the important role that training needs analysis and the DDP play in a doctorate.

When a student begins a doctorate, it is extremely unlikely that she or he has all the skills needed for its completion. Some skills and knowledge will be gained ‘on the job’, in other words through learning about research through the practical application of devising a research question, collecting and analysing data and writing a thesis based on this data. But other skills are best gained from training, and the DDP has been designed to help students to gain the capacities to become an independent researcher. Training needs analysis is the means to match the skills that require upgrading to the programme of training available through the DDP.

As with other aspects of a doctorate, students need to be proactive in identifying their training needs and using DDP training to gain skills. Their supervisory team is there to advise and provide guidance on this and all other elements of doctoral study.