

COMPASS REGENERATION ACADEMY

PILOT PROGRAMME EVALUATION

Report by

The Institute for Political and Economic Governance
University of Manchester

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Compass Regeneration Academy Evaluation

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Summary

This report is the evaluation of the first pilot programme of the Compass Regeneration Academy in Merseyside. The Academy was established by a group of housing organisations in Merseyside to provide a range of benefits including skills, leadership and better networks among housing and regeneration professionals in the area. The pilot programme began in February 2005, with the trainees graduating in June 2005 following a series of twelve one-day events.

The first course was a success in a variety of ways. There are lessons to be learnt. Indeed lessons were learnt during the course, but the broad objectives of the Academy have been well served by the initial programme. If these objectives are to be fully met in the long term however, the steering group should consider carefully the issues raised by the evaluation. These and the successes are considered under the headings used for the programme and evaluation.

Pass on skills and experience gained in 4 areas: Strategic, Community, Economic and Physical Regeneration

Neither the methodology used nor the relatively short distance since the completion of the course allow full progress against this objective to be measured.

As measured by the views of graduates themselves, the course had statistically significant overall impact on their levels of knowledge in the areas covered. However, the increase in knowledge in areas central to the Academy's objectives may not have been as big as in more peripheral areas. This is likely to reflect both the broad nature of the course and hence its relative lack of depth and the low levels of knowledge of trainees in some areas.

The course was viewed very positively by the trainees. Three quarters of those who attended the course thought it had largely or completely met its objectives. One of the most striking findings of the evaluation is that the graduates seem rather less satisfied with the extent to which their own objectives had been met compared with those of the course overall: only a little over half thought their own needs had been largely or completely met. The main reason for the lower satisfaction levels recorded by graduates regarding the fulfilment of their own objectives is lack of communication as to the purpose of the programme and each event, and of what the trainees should expect to achieve from it.

The principle of mentoring, new for the most part to graduates and mentors alike, seems to have been broadly accepted. Indeed, with greater clarity of objective on the purpose of mentoring and guidance to mentors, there is considerable and as yet largely untapped potential for mentoring to support the objectives of the programme.

Develop ‘grow-your-own workforce’ by the local housing organisations defining the specialist skills required in local regeneration

A solid start has been towards meeting this objective in that the course is a clear statement of intent towards the need for the partners to “grow their own” staff. On the issue of developing specialist skills there has been less progress. With hindsight the pilot programme might have benefited from a more careful programme of design in the light of the Egan review and an analysis of the skills and abilities of trainees in relation to them.

By focussing the programme on such a young and inexperienced group, the breath of coverage within the time allowed probably asked too much of the trainees. At the moment the course design suffers from being something of a generalist induction programme as well as a skills training opportunity.

Provide readily available supply of skilled and experienced workforce to meet recruitment needs of local housing organisations

One short programme is unlikely to make a significant impact immediately towards realising this objective. The fact that the course is viewed positively by those involved with it is clearly a success, and can only improve the likelihood that the partner organisations will invest further in developing provision for their staff in the future. The test will be whether in the future employers are prepared to meet the costs of provision from their own resources.

Invest in ‘stars of tomorrow’ by supporting and sharing resources, knowledge and talent across Merseyside

Inevitably it is difficult to assess the extent to which this objective has been achieved. The early signs are promising. The graduates know and understand that they participated in a programme for would-be leaders. They responded well, with attendance levels high throughout the programme. They clearly feel a commitment to the programme: attendance at the focus group was high and the graduates offered a range of insights into the programme.

One of the most marked findings of the course is the extent to which the students valued the opportunity for networking it created.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The first programme of the Compass Regeneration Academy was successful. If the points raised here are addressed, the Academy could substantively meet its objectives within a relatively short period of time.

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Despite the success of the course, the steering group faces some choices about the future development of the Academy. Some of these are immediate issues for consideration before the second intake later this year.

The tension between individual and course objectives and relatively low learning residuals both point towards an ambiguity in the objectives of the course.

These findings can be traced back to the structure of the course itself which has aspects of an in-depth skills programme, but which is also in the nature of a highly developed induction programme.

In our view the steering group ought to consider two different broad options for the development of the programme, for our main conclusion is that the two sets of objectives are difficult to square. The key recommendation of the evaluation is that the steering group should consider reorienting the course. To illustrate the point, a distinction is drawn between two options: *option one*: a shortened course used as part of induction and *option two*, redesigned programme, probably for more experienced staff with a higher knowledge content.

As currently structured or if remodelled as per option one, the course may fail to meet its first objective in a substantive manner though it would preserve the valuable role of the programme as a means of familiarising trainees with regeneration in the broad sense, as well as creating a sense of forward momentum for the leaders of tomorrow. It would however focus the benefits of the programme on current employers. As such the course is less likely to attract third party subsidy.

Proceeding along the lines of option two would probably require a higher level of investment but would be likely to drive a more significant wedge of skills into the local regeneration sector. Because the course would anticipate rather than meet immediate skill need, the case for further public sector investment would be clearer.

Other Issues

A variety of other issues were raised by graduates which require attention in subsequent courses. These are set out in section 7 of the report.

- Clearer aims and communication
- Better structure and organisation of content
- Clearer themes
- More examples of 'worst practice' (against 'best practice')
- More time on discussion of personal projects
- Housekeeping

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2. Evaluation Aims and Objectives

This is the report of the evaluation undertaken for RENEW and the steering group. The objectives of the evaluation were:

- To establish if the course has met its stated objectives in the eyes of participants, mentors and stakeholders. Further, to assess if participants' individually identified objectives were met and if other unwritten outcomes such as the establishment of networks have been achieved.
- To assess what has been learnt from running the course either on the part of the participants or the organisers at what extent was the course run as originally planned. If changes were made why they were made and what was the impact?
- Assessment how lessons learnt from the course can be applied in the future. Preparation of an initial outline of options for future courses.

Methodology

This report is based on:

- Analysis of the pre-course and post course questionnaires filled in by participants
- Focus groups held with a cross section of graduates
- A further focus group with graduates' mentors
- Consultation with the steering group
- Background research conducted as part of a project undertaken by IPEG for Government Office North West on the skills needs of the housing and regeneration sectors of the North West.

3. The Compass Regeneration Academy

The pilot programme of the Compass Regeneration Academy Merseyside was established to

- Pass on skills and experience gained in 4 areas: Strategic, Community, Economic and Physical Regeneration
- Develop 'grow-your-own workforce' by the local housing organisations defining the specialist skills required in local regeneration
- Provide readily available supply of skilled and experienced workforce to meet recruitment needs of local housing organisations
- Invest in 'stars of tomorrow' by supporting and sharing resources, knowledge and talent across Merseyside

The first cohort of trainees entered the programme in February and graduated in June 2005.

The course is highly innovative, strategic in intent in that it was designed to reach beyond the immediate skill needs of the supporting partners, and delivered in the context of a less-than-fully-supportive funding environment. To have delivered the course at all is a considerable achievement.

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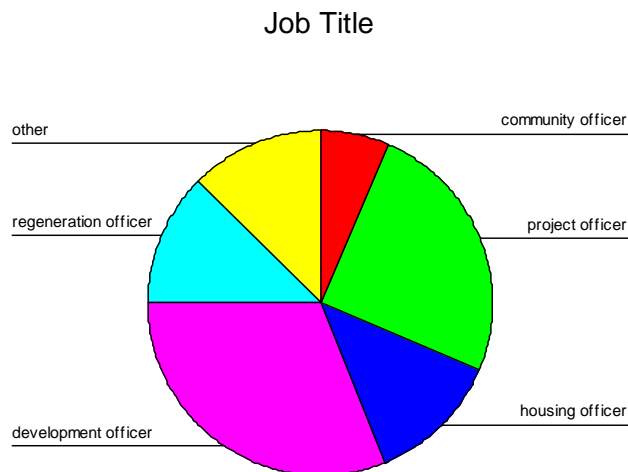
4. The Cohort for the Pilot Programme

Upon inception, the aim of the steering group was to recruit twenty trainees.

Initially recruitment was slow. Within a few weeks of the course starting there were still concerns that the viability of the course may be undermined by a lack of participants. By the time the course started in February, a total of [17] participants had enrolled.

A combination of strong support allied to pressure from members of the steering group allied to the attractiveness of the course persuaded several housing organisations to send staff on the programme.

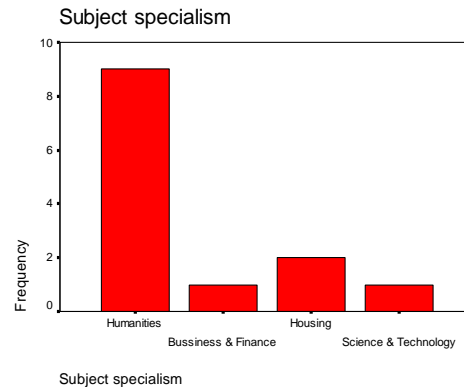
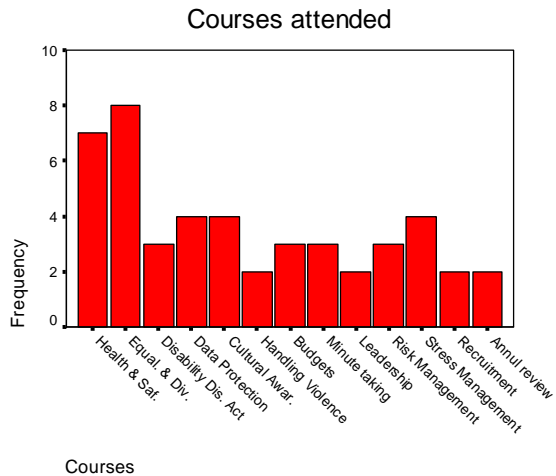
The participants in the course were overwhelmingly Liverpool-resident and based (6 in both cases). The largest portion of the participant are development officers (5), and project officers (4).



The participants are all graduates, with a significant minority having either a post-graduate qualification or having undertaken further studies.

Whilst the majority of trainees have undertaken degrees of some relevance to their employment, relatively few have undertaken any relevant training and development as part of their employment.

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The pre-course questionnaires did not collect information on the age of participants. Nonetheless we know from the focus groups and discussions with members of the steering group that the overwhelming majority of the trainees are in their twenties, many in their first jobs post-graduation.

Since the course began, some of the trainees have moved jobs. There was a clear feeling among graduates in the focus group that having attended the course, they were in a stronger position to advance their careers within the local regeneration sector.

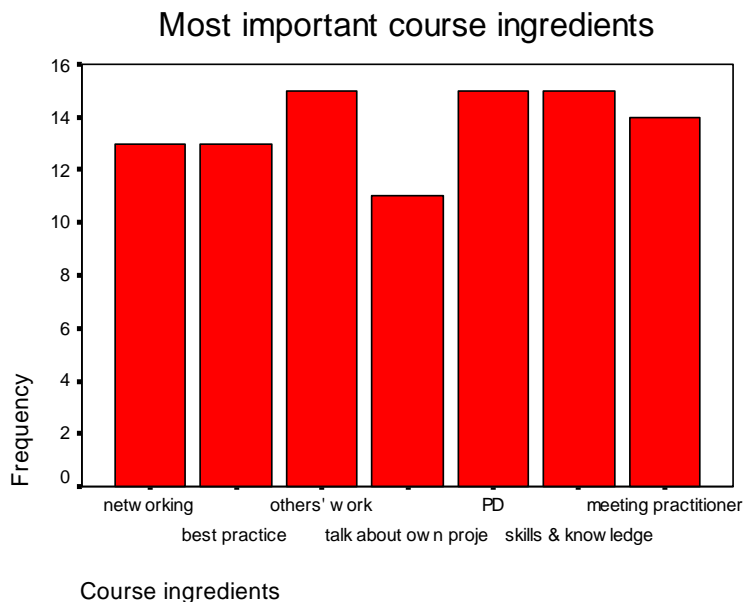
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5. Detailed Findings

5.1 Overall Expectations

The trainees on the pilot programme had very high expectations of the course.

The table below, based on the pre-course questionnaire shows that nearly all the trainees thought most of the aspects of the course were important to them.



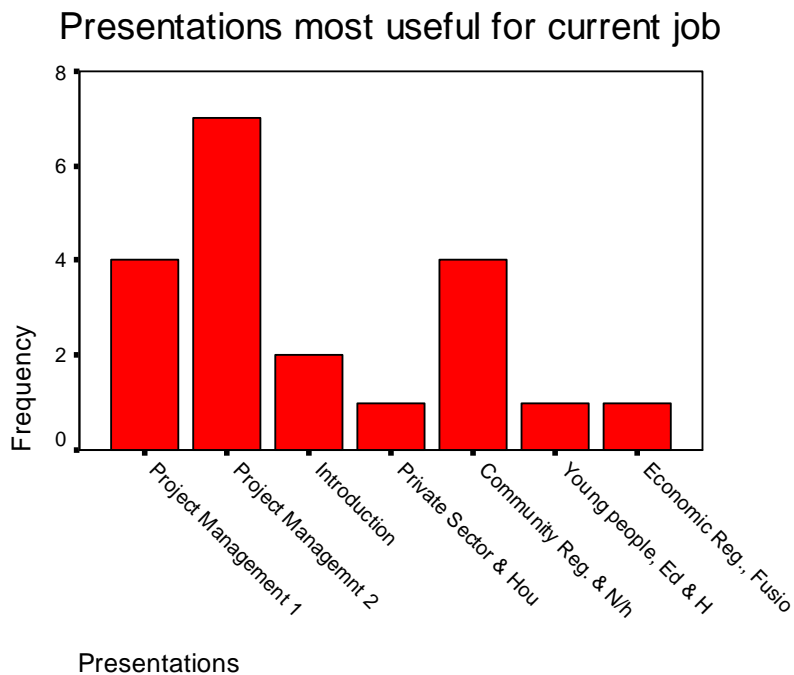
Among the trainees, there was unanimity as to their desire to hear about “disasters”, that is the negative (alongside the positive) lessons learnt by practitioners. This was covered in the focus group, where one individual’s desire to hear “more examples of failure” was echoed widely. The sense expressed vocally in the focus group with graduates was that some of the presentations instead erred on the side of marketing.

Subsequent courses should include a request to presenters and facilitators to cover project failures, how they happened, the lessons learned and how they can be avoided]. This approach maybe particularly useful in communicating otherwise inaccessible material, as a way of keeping trainees focused on issues.

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5.2 Expectations: Course Content

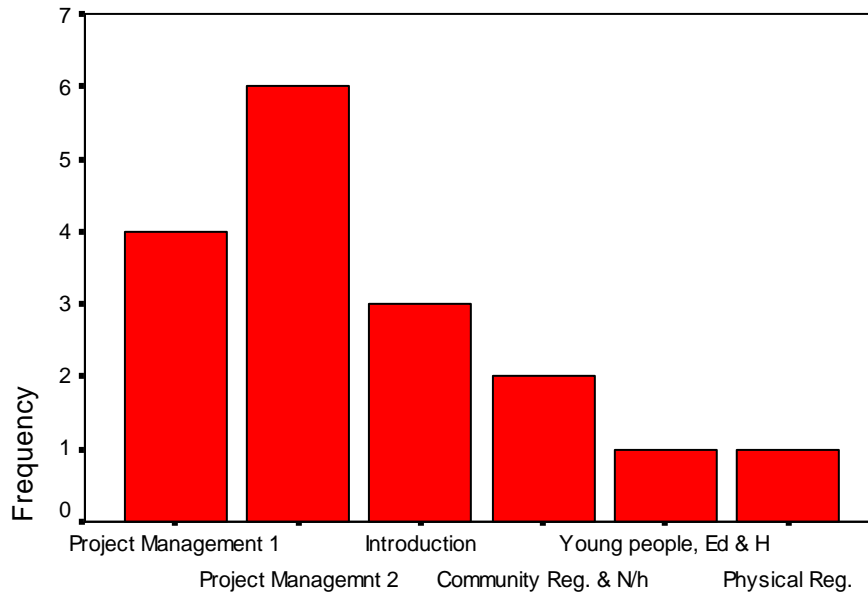
The pre-course questionnaire asked the trainees to identify the areas of the course they thought would be more useful for their current jobs. The responses set out in the table below show that trainees felt only the project management and community and neighborhoods elements would be particularly useful. Even so only the project management element secured anything like a majority of the trainees who thought it would be useful.



At the beginning of the course then, it seems students may not have had a sense of how they would apply the course to their current jobs. At the pre-course stage neither did the trainees feel that the subjects covered would be useful for future jobs.

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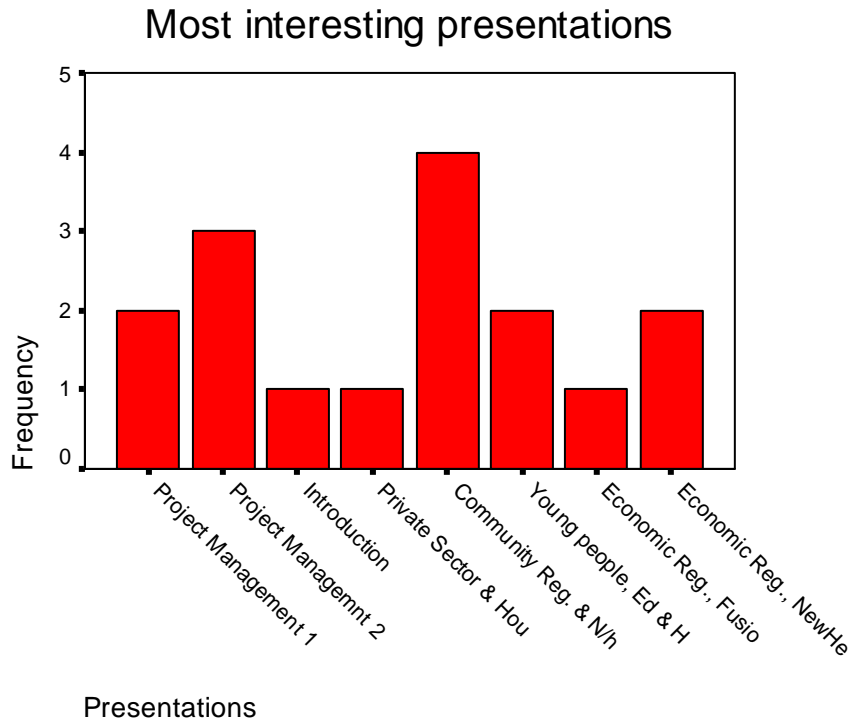
Presentations most useful for future projects



Presentations

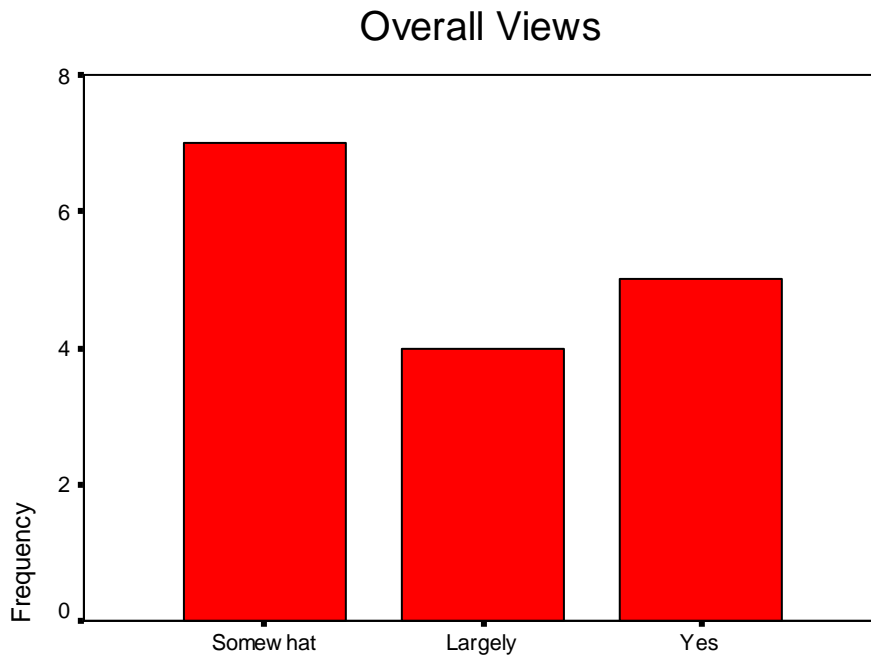
As the post-course evaluation figures below show, this changed during the course. The reason may be because the trainees were taking an overly narrow view of what they would do. There are two pieces of evidence to support this. Firstly, the students thought that several elements of the course would be interesting, more than they would be useful, as demonstrated in the chart below and those above.

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This was supported by a range of comments in the focus group with mentors. There was a measure of support that the course has served to broaden the horizons and increase the confidence of the graduates.

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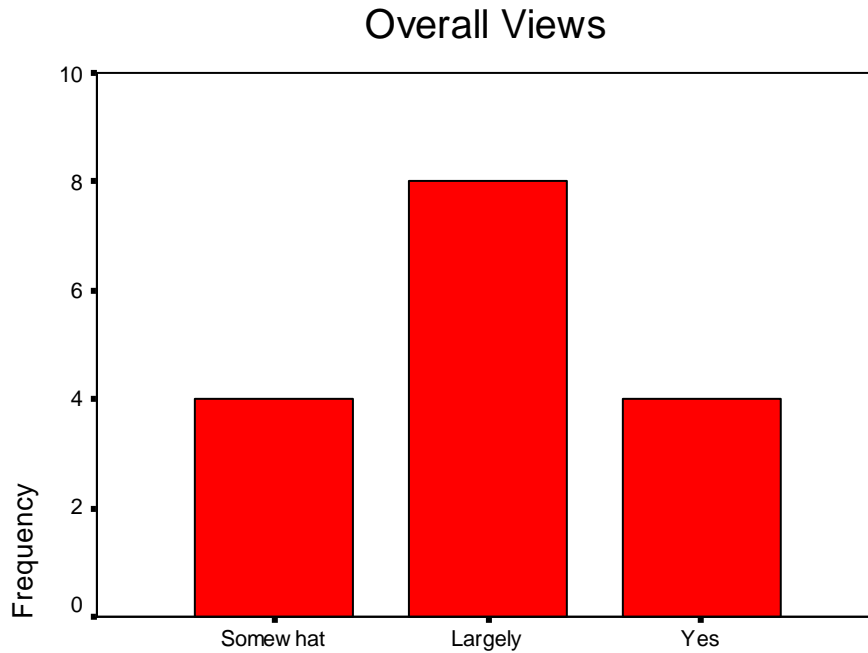
Do you feel able to apply what you have learnt to your existing job?

Though the graduates felt confident, it wasn't really about the course content. The problem for the course then is that quite a large number of the graduates seem not really to have perceived the benefits of the course content. This is explored in the following section.

5.3 Personal Versus Organisational Objectives

In the eyes of the participants the course was successful in meeting its objectives. As the chart below shows, 50% of the participants felt it has entirely or largely met its objectives, with the remaining 25% feeling it had somewhat met them.

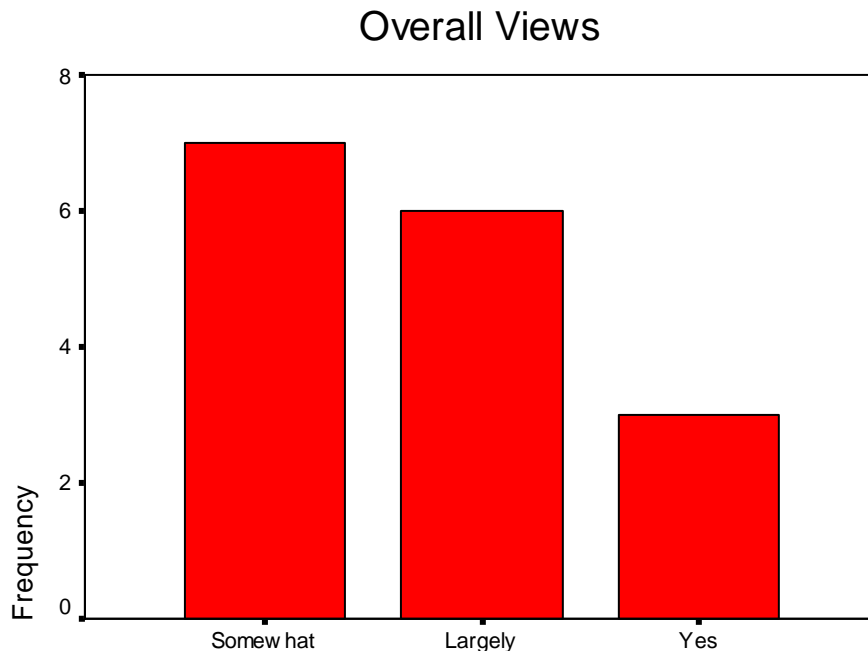
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Has the course met its learning objectives?

The participants themselves felt less satisfied about the extent to which their objectives had been met as the chart below shows. The largest group, 44% of the total felt that the course had only partially met their own objectives, and the remainder, round 56% that the course had largely or completely met their objectives. This is a good performance. Nonetheless the difference between the two profiles was felt to be worthy of further examination in the focus groups.

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Has the course met your own objectives?

We think the difference is due to several factors. Firstly, it looks very much as if the course leaders failed to communicate properly the aims, structure and intended outcomes of the course. Too great a gap was allowed to develop between the expectations of the trainees and the capability of the course to meet them.

Second, the course like any such programme had to strike a balance between the needs of the employer and the expectations of the participants. The course didn't necessarily get this wrong, but it struck the balance in a place which covered ground the trainees were relatively new to and with which they are to a degree uncomfortable.

The final factor is the most challenging to the steering group. It seems probable, putting several of the findings together that the course has tried to deal with too many topics, in too superficial a manner, with insufficient rigour of design and in all probability for too young a group of trainees to enable it to meet fully the learning objectives.

Here the discussion in the focus group with trainees was particularly informative. The dominant theme in the discussion was the issue of why participants felt less satisfied for themselves than for the course was the quality of the presentations:

“The problem was more about how it was put across, not the actual areas covered”

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“These are the areas we wanted to cover but not in that way”

“Should have done one whole day on Master Planning”

“In some presentations you lost the will to live”

“I don’t mind if presenters are not very good, but I do want them to be relevant”

These comments speak to a clear sense of frustration about the detail of course management and planning. Clearly presentational issues were partially behind trainees’ lower personal satisfaction ratings. However, as the discussion progressed, one theme in particular dominated the discussion, commanding considerable support among the graduates. It is summarised in the following quote.

“High gain, good presentation. Low gain, bad presentation”

There is a very large element of truth in this statement. But the graduates seemed so clearly fixed on the requirement that presentations were of high calibre as to raise questions about why it is that the graduates felt this was so important. It seems probable that there are several reasons. First, the course attempted to cover a lot of ground, quickly and only the very best communicators could really keep up with the pace. Secondly, given the variable nature of presenters, it is possible that too much was expected of the trainees too: they may need either more experience or a more structured programme of learning to enable them to absorb and fully benefit from the course.

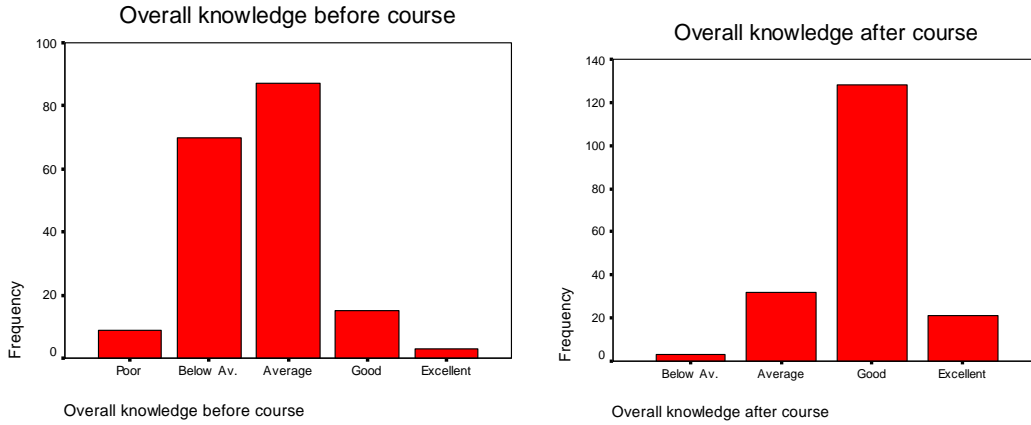
5.4 Learning Achieved

In an evaluation of this nature, undertaken at this stage it is difficult to fully assess the extent of the learning achieved through the course.

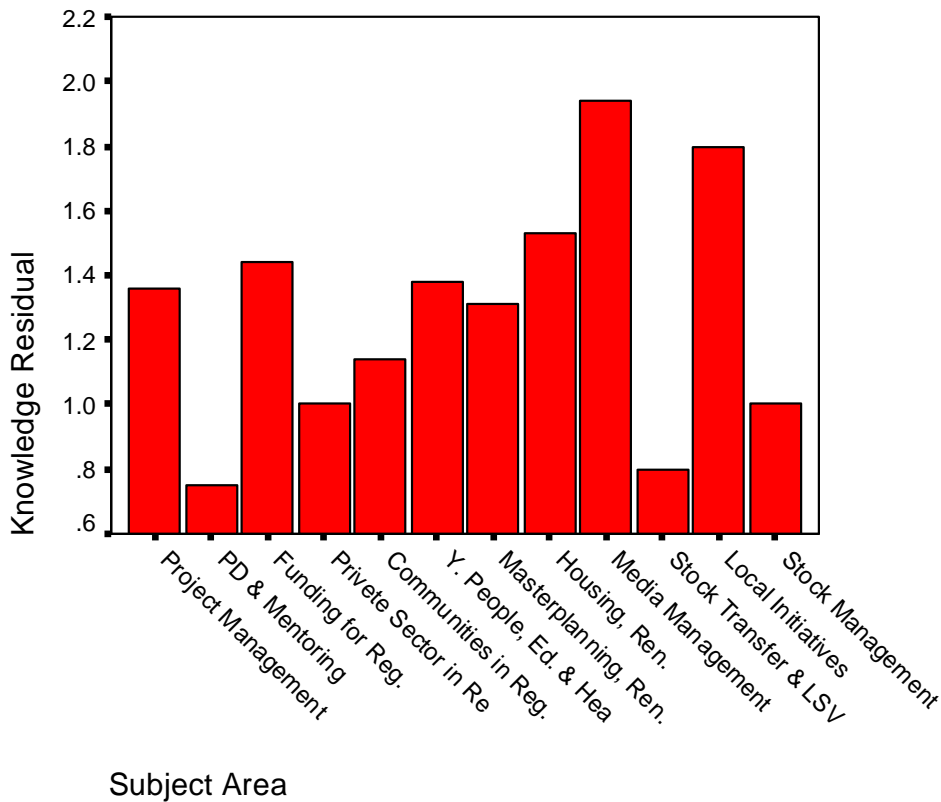
As for the course participants themselves, analysis of the questionnaires reveals a statistically significant improvement in knowledge.

Looking at the two charts below detailing the knowledge of participants before and after the programme, a clear shift to the right can be seen. Before the course, the balance of trainees put their knowledge at average or below. Afterwards the balance was for “good” reported knowledge levels.

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The table below sets out the knowledge residuals in each of the main areas covered by the Compass Regeneration Academy.



The knowledge residual refers to the change in level of knowledge reported by the course participants as a result of the programme.

The table shows that the knowledge residual was highest in media management and local initiatives, followed by housing market renewal and lowest in the areas of housing management and stock transfer.

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Clearly the knowledge residual is highest in some areas – media being the most obvious – where the baseline level of knowledge was lowest. The discussion at the focus group with graduates suggests that this may also reflect the quality of the presentations.

Event taking account of these factors, the level of knowledge residual looks low in several areas where our knowledge of the trainees suggests that there should be considerable scope for improvement. In other words, not much progress seems to have been made on a range of issues. These include the two housing issues referred to above along with the role of the private sector and community regeneration. It is worth noting that the detailed analysis contained in the appendix suggests that in these latter two areas, the participants themselves rated the presentations highly (in the case of the former 93% rating the presentations as good or excellent).

On a variety of other fronts the course facilitated a range of opportunities which ought to, and on the basis of the focus groups are already, have a positive impact on the graduates knowledge of the field in which they work.

One of the clearest findings from the research is the very high value the course participants attach to the opportunities for networking afforded by the programme. This was a phenomenon we examined in the focus groups. Importantly, there are already clear signs that the graduates are using the network of which they still feel a part to help them in their jobs. The semi-social links created since the conclusion of the course are now being used to help in problem-solving and sharing of experience. More than one participant in the focus groups cited examples of networking within the group of a kind which indicates a valuable degree of trust engendered by the programme.

On other criteria, all the participants found the best practice elements of the course useful, and the overwhelming majority found the opportunity to discuss their own work and to meet practitioners, useful. There was also support from nearly all graduates for the personal development aims of the course.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The first programme of the Compass Regeneration Academy was successful. It has made as much progress as could reasonably have been expected towards meeting its objectives.

If the points raised in this report are addressed, the Academy could substantively meet its objectives within a relatively short period of time.

The plus points from the course are:

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- The development of a robust network of course supporters in the Merseyside regeneration and housing community
- The initiation of the programme which meets a demonstrable need
- Significant progress in the time towards creating a potential group of leaders and a network to support them.

There are learning points from the course:

- The execution of the course could be tighter in important respects. These are dealt with separately in the next and final section of this report.
- The levels of learning achieved by the programme may not have been as high as the programme initiators might have expected. For a combination of reasons associated with the relative inexperience of the trainees and the breadth of the course it is possible that the skills objectives of the programme may not be met in the longer term.

Despite the success of the course, the steering group faces some choices about the future development of the Academy. Some of these are immediate issues for consideration before the second intake later this year.

The tension between individual and course objectives and relatively low learning residuals (in what?) both point towards an ambiguity in the objectives of the course.

These findings can be traced back to the structure of the course itself which has aspects of an in-depth skills programme, but which is also in the nature of a highly developed induction programme.

In our view the steering group ought to consider two different broad options for the development of the programme, for our main conclusion is that the two sets of objectives are difficult to square. The key recommendation of the evaluation is that the steering group should consider reorienting the course. Illustrate the point a distinction is drawn between two options.

Option 1 – Leaders for the Future

Consider shortening the programme
Maintain the broad focus of the course
Maintain the focus on a young age group

Option 2 – Skills and Knowledge

Maintain the course length
Narrow the range of issues covered
Focus on a early-to-mid career cohort
Deepen the learning element of the programme

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Consider some form of accreditation either academic or via. For example Common Purpose

It is important to emphasise that the course evaluated here was a success and that if repeated, the programme would provide an important contribution to meeting the objectives of the steering group.

As currently structured, the course itself (as opposed to any programme to which it subsequently leads) is likely to fulfil some of the objectives better than others. In particular there must be a concern that the course will fail to meet the first objective in a substantive manner.

A remodelling of the course along the lines of option one would have a similar effect, though it would preserve the valuable role of the programme as a means of familiarising trainees with regeneration in the broad sense, as well as creating a sense of forward momentum for the leaders of tomorrow. It would however focus the benefits of the programme on current employers. As such the course is less likely to attract third party subsidy. If shortened however the programme could be run over a shorter period at lower cost, and thereby benefit more trainees.

Proceeding along the lines of option two would probably require a higher level of investment but would be likely to drive a more significant wedge of skills into the local regeneration sector. Because the course would anticipate rather than meet immediate skill need, the case for further public sector investment would be clearer.

7. Summary of Detailed Issues for Follow-on Programmes

Whatever form the course takes in the future, a variety of other issues were raised by graduates which require attention in subsequent courses. The main ones were:

- The apparent need for the organisers of the events to be given a clearer brief on what is expected. Some of the days or parts of them were thought by the participants to be lacking in substance, seemingly with a marketing rather than a learning emphasis. Presenters should be thoroughly prepared, ensuring that they inform, stimulate and challenge the trainees.
- There was an appetite among the participants to have more examples of what didn't and doesn't work along side good practice.
- The sessions should be more interactive, with activities designed to consolidate learning balanced more evenly against presentation.
- The range of attendees. The first programme was attended by the staff of a wide range of social housing and related organisations. The majority of the graduates in the focus group thought that the course would benefit

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- from having trainees from non-RSL, public and private sector organisations.
- Clearer aims and communication will be important if the significant gap in the views expressed by trainees between their own and the courses objectives is to be closed. From the outset the trainees should be encouraged to be realistic. This should be supplemented by the mentoring process which should also help the trainees to identify areas for future development through specialist training.
 - Better structure and organisation of content. Following on from and probably reflecting the foregoing points, action is needed to deal with the assertion made repeatedly in the feedback from and in the focus group with graduates that there was duplication of content. The course organisers might wish to consider facilitating a planning workshop with event organisers considerably in advance of the follow-on programme. This should share detailed programme information, allocating responsibilities clearly.
 - At each stage of the planning process, presenters and facilitators should be encouraged to incorporate in their plans an opportunity for trainees to present their own experiences and projects. This strategy will improve the opportunities for learning retention by trainees provided that they are able to relate their own knowledge to that of the training sessions effectively.
 - At least one event, some basic housekeeping arrangements were less than adequate, including catering.