

Independent Researchers' Forum

Main activities and events of the SIG in the past year.

Independent researchers face barriers in gaining ethical approval to carry out research and this has continued to be a focus in 2020. In October 2019 BERA and IRF organised an event which focused on the challenges faced by independent researchers seeking ethical approval. A solution to this problem of ethics was suggested, requiring discussion within BERA. Follow up by independent researchers presented the issues on the BERA blog and demonstrated the commitment of independent researchers to adhere to the highest standards of ethics in their research, in line with BERA guidelines. Independent researchers requested BERA to play a part in supporting and enabling a collaborative approach between learned societies. This was discussed by BERA's Engagement Committee. Further discussions with BERA are planned in early 2021 and we look forward to updating independent researchers on developments and asking independent researchers for involvement, networking and sharing of contacts with other organisations.

What are the key issues currently affecting your Special Interest Area?

Key Issues for independent researchers are: • BERA Review of SIG structure • Channels of communication within BERA • Different role of co-convenors of IRF • Challenges for independent researchers seeking ethical approval to carry out research The ongoing review of BERA's SIG structure is directly relevant to independent researchers because of the different status they experience in their work. Independent researchers' situation is different from those of other researchers and 'unattached' researchers face significant barriers. Yet there are increasing numbers of independent researchers carrying out creative research in all fields but particularly in schools, FE and educational technology. Because of the pandemic, the review of the SIG structure has not progressed as much as we would wish, but we look forward to working closely with BERA to find solutions which lead to 'a more level playing field'. Perhaps most important for independent researchers would be the offer of opportunities to collaborate, investigate and share. When more is known, it would be appropriate to consult and connect with independent researchers about proposals.

Are there any particular developments for your SIG on the horizon, e.g. newsletters, publications, blogs, events, projects?

Within BERA, we now have a working dialogue with Practitioner Research SIG and socio-cultural and cultural-historical activity theory SIG. Academic writing is one of the generic issues that many independent researchers want to progress with. Some independent researchers see writing as an activity that builds community and sharing, others want to write primarily to improve their chances of publication. A workshop about writing as a cultural activity is planned for 2021 and, to follow, a new development of an online writing event. Also we have increased connections with other groups of independent researchers and individuals in educational settings #FEResearchmeet and educational technology. Through Twitter we build connections and communication with other organisations and develop collaboration, investigation and sharing - and thinking.

What other organizations does your SIG collaborate with?

IRF has developed work with SIGS, in particular worked with socio-cultural and cultural-historical activity theory SIG and Practitioner Research. We also connect with #FEResearchMeet @feresearchmeet and are amazed at the research being undertaken by FE staff. We have built collaboration with: ALT SRA RAPAL FemEdTech UCL And others!

How has your SIG worked to encourage diversity amongst your membership? How do you plan to encourage diversity in the future?

It is really important that BERA recognises the need to encourage engagement of researchers across the 4 nations. However the IRF has to develop in other ways before it can address this issue. We suggest that the way this could best be done is to have geographical subgroups of the IRF which then feed into the main Forum. In the meantime, where independent researchers are members of other SIGs, it is possible for the four nations approach to be adopted by the SIGs they choose.

IRF consists of many diverse groups carrying out research for many different reasons and in different sectors. These include teacher researchers in schools, lecturers in FE, contract researchers, retired and unemployed researchers, researchers who are writing following completion of the doctorate, educational technology researchers, researchers with charitable organisations and those who are self-employed. For independent researchers, inclusion is a structural issue because of their employment status is outside of academia and they are unable to access the benefits available to other researchers. So for independent researchers it is about ensuring that all these diverse types of researchers are included in the forum, treated equally and with respect.