Co-designing project planning and guidance support for people embarking on embedded researcher initiatives

Workshop summary by Joe Langley and Rebecca Partridge:

This workshop aimed to use the experience of people who had been or currently were involved in planning, managing, delivering, mentoring or being (an) embedded researcher initiative(s), to develop a set of resources that would assist others who were considering setting up an embedded researcher initiative.

The key question we kept hold of throughout the workshop was: “What do you wish you had known at the start of your embedded researcher work?”

A range of creative and activity based exercises were utilised to encourage people to think and reflect (in a different way) on their experiences and draw out unconscious knowledge.

The starting point for this session was ten design options of themes considered important to consider about an embedded researcher initiative. These categories were drawn from research based on literature and experiences. They are expanded upon and described in full in a webinar you have all been given access to.
The first activity presented the 10 design options on postcards and asked the five groups of people to each individually comment and add thoughts to each postcard by circulating them amongst their group. These were then used to structure a conversation within the groups about each of the ten design options.

The second activity required the groups to take a systems perspective and consider whether there was any priority or hierarchy to the ten design options. They were asked to use the design option postcards to represent any priority and to share back the rationale and criteria for their priority. Whilst every group response was different, there was some broad agreement that the ‘pink’ icons (blue in the image on page 1) were had the most impact on the project.

Following these two activities, everyone was asked if they were broadly happy that the ten design options covered the things people needed to consider when planning an embedded designer initiative, whether any needed changing, taken away or new options adding. Nothing was added or taken away at this stage. There was a proposition that ‘Political and Power Dynamics’ might be more appropriately labelled ‘Ownership’.

The third activity assigned people one design option each and asked them to build a physical metaphor model to explore and represent what that design options meant to them. They paired up with the one or two other people who had the same design option as themselves and shared their models with each other before combine them in some way to create a shared representation.

Each small group then shared they metaphor and their thinking behind it with everyone else.
The fourth activity asked people to translate their 3D model and the thinking behind it into a 2D visual representation, infographic, road map or other form of image that would help someone else (someone new to embedded researchers) who was planning an embedded researcher initiative, to consider the issues within each specific design option. You were invited to be very concrete about specific advice that could be passed on to people. EG: “We suggest/recommend that you do ...”

Intermission - discussion about Embedded Researcher Network

The final activity asked people to consider who might want, need or use these resources and where they might look for them or how these resources might be made available to them. A number of types of individuals and organisations were identified before a discussion evolved about terminology, people not knowing about embedded researcher and therefore not knowing to look for these resources.
activity illustrated a great breadth to the interpretation of what embedded research is, who embedded researchers are and what types of organisations are involved in embedded research initiatives, with a notable point being that embedded research initiatives do not always involve universities or university academics.

The issue of where embedded researchers are situated (‘home’, ‘work’, ‘site’, ‘context’, ‘employer’, ‘insider’, ‘outsider’, ‘loyalty’) provoked some debate with no general conclusions accept that there is wide variation and the embedded researcher needs substantial support (practical, intellectual, procedural, developmental, emotional) from an organisation within which they might be embedded to do research and other organisations (if there are any) that they might have contractual ties to. Arguably, the degree of support needed increases as the notion of ‘home’ becomes more contended; the more organisations the individual is ‘working between’; the more of a ‘boundary spanner’ the individual is.

Summary
We set out to co-design a set of resources that could advise, guide and support someone planning an embedded researcher initiative, drawing on the experiences of people who have planned, delivered and ‘lived’ embedded researcher initiatives.

We are still somewhat short of achieving this in its final form; further work is needed to take the information from this event and create the final resources. However, the insights elicited from the group have:

- validated the ‘findings’ derived from the research work
- confirmed the ten design options
- provided some concrete advice that can be passed on to others
- given the research team some additional and powerful metaphors that can be used to describe this work and the design options
- raised some additional questions about how to disseminate the resources (and the very notion of embedded research) to people and organisations that might benefit from it, getting them right into the hearts, minds and hands of relevant people
- coalesced a strong group of contributors, part ‘owners’ and advocates for this project, its findings and its outputs
- conceived an embryonic embedded researcher network