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BRISTOL

EVALUATING A PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE METHOD FOR THE APPRAISAL OF
STUDENT CONCERNS: SUPPLEMENTARY TRIAL

USING PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRES IN A FACILITATED LEARNING GROUP

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SUMMARY

This project contributes a final trial to the appraisal of personal questionnaires conducted at UWE Bristol between October and April 2007.

13 psychology undergraduates in a Facilitated Learning Group completed personal questionnaires at the start of their first term at university, assigning monthly ratings of personal and academic concerns up to the start of the third term. At the end of the project period, participants were invited to write a reflective account linked to the questionnaire record and to complete an evaluation of the questionnaire.

Analytical and presentational reporting of the data illustrated participants' engagement with personal questionnaires and provided a basis for their appraisal. Quantitative and qualitative outcomes showed that students can use personal questionnaires to record a range of concerns and to assign valid ratings to their variation over time. Discernable patterns of change across participants may indicate areas for further research into the student experience. Reflective accounts linked to questionnaire records supported the validity of questionnaire content while suggesting that they indicate rather than capture the depth and complexity of personal processes in student development. Participants reported that the questionnaires were relevant and easy to use, and that for some participants they were helpful in monitoring concerns and highlighting areas for action.

The outcomes were discussed in relation to the parent study, issues around engaging students in self-report procedures, and support for these by university staff. It was recommended that the strengths of personal questionnaires may be most usefully applied in researching the student experience, as an aid to student self-reflection and monitoring in academic support settings, and as a tool for systematic evaluation in psychological counselling.

INTRODUCTION

The research reported here falls within the aims and scope of the project *'Evaluating a personal questionnaire method for the appraisal of student concerns: Report of a pilot study.'* (Topham 2007), conducted at the University of the West of England between April and October 2007. The summary report is included in Appendix 1; the full report is available from the researcher if required. This supplementary project focuses on a student setting which was intended but not enabled during the original project period due to temporary organisational constraints. It explores the use of personal questionnaires (Shapiro 1961, Chalkley 2004) as a tool for recording and reflecting on student concerns within a Facilitated Learning Group in the university's Graduate Development Programme.

BACKGROUND

The academic lineage and clinical uses of personal questionnaires are described in the report of the parent study, above. Concluding its review of the literature, the report noted that:

'The idea and the value basis of a personal questionnaire, rather than the specific clinical procedures described here, were the stimulus for the current project. In combining individual subjective data with numerical scoring over time, such questionnaires appear to offer a tool that is suited to student populations and educational values. A personal questionnaire may invite users to focus on particular domains of experience (e.g. domestic issues, studying, relationships) while offering flexibility in the number of issues reported and allowing for data items to be added or revised over time. It is highly person-centred and might be used to help a student identify a particular need for support, to reflect on developments, or to provide a basis for a general discussion of concerns' (p.9).

The parent study explored the use of personal questionnaires across a range of student settings: advising, counselling, pre-placement, pre-exam, and professional training. Settings were differentiated by the frequency and presumed intensity of staff-student contact; outcomes of questionnaire trials suggested that settings were also associated with varying degrees of self-reflection by students.

For example, Physiotherapy students at the end of their first year and prior to their first work placement, showed relatively high levels of self-reflection (as evidenced by frequency and length of concerns recorded); Computer Science students at the end of their first year and prior to their first year exams showed relatively low levels of self-reflection. Clients of

Student Advisory Services made relatively limited while Counselling Service clients made relatively full entries on their personal questionnaires.

Although not the focus of the research, the report of the parent study considered possible reasons for these differences (gender, staff relationship, orientation of programme, method of questionnaire distribution) within the overall aim of evaluating personal questionnaires as a guide to student support processes. The current study continues that process in a student setting that falls between the close engagement of a counselling relationship and the staff-student distance in a lecture.

AIM

This study aims to explore and evaluate how students in a tutorial group engage with personal questionnaires as a possible tool for monitoring and reflecting on their student experience.

METHOD

The study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC07-08/13) and was conducted in two stages. Firstly, personal questionnaires were used by participating students to keep a rateable record of their concerns about being at university. Secondly, towards the end of the research period participants were asked to write a reflective account of their experience of being at university, and to complete an evaluation of their use of the questionnaires.

Participants

Participants were first-year undergraduate students taking a single honours programme in Psychology who were members of one Facilitated Learning Group (FLG) in the university's Graduate Development Programme (GDP).

All first-year Psychology undergraduates entering UWE Bristol in September 2007 were enrolled in a compulsory GDP module entitled 'Psychology Connected' for which they were each assigned to a small group (FLG) for the duration of that module. The module and attendant groups were intended to support students' transition to higher education, to give them the skills and confidence to manage and benefit from their learning, and to support their integration into the university community. Each group of 10 to 15 students met weekly throughout the academic year and was facilitated by a staff member of the Department of Psychology including the researcher.

Procedure

The project was conducted in two stages.

Part 1

As part of initial activities exploring the process of transition to university, the GDP group of 13 students facilitated by the researcher were asked at the start of their first term to complete and rate personal questionnaires which focussed on their concerns about being at university; a completed example is shown in Appendix 2.   Students were informed that the questionnaires would be periodically reviewed by themselves and could be used to guide reflections on their university experience, in and out of the group sessions. Within group meetings, personal questionnaires were reviewed at approximately monthly intervals during the period from October 2007 to April 2008. Questionnaires were reviewed blind to previous ratings; a cumulative record of individual concerns and ratings was kept by the researcher. Students were invited to add and score additional concerns as they arose during the year.

Part 2

Towards the end of the project period, all participants were invited to contribute a written account of their first two terms at university based on their personal questionnaire record. Those consenting to participate in Part 2 was supplied with their complete personal questionnaire record, a set of instructions (see Appendix 4) and an addressed envelope for returning their account directly to the researcher.

In the final session of the FLG group, all participants in parts 1 and 2 were asked to complete brief evaluation forms about their experience of using personal questionnaires. Apart from those participants in the parent study who used personal questionnaires as part of their counselling, this was the only trial group where a systematic evaluation of the group was possible.

Gaining consent

At their initial GDP group meetings in October 2007, students were informed that the questionnaires might be used for research relating to the student experience. Students were informed that if that was the case they would be fully informed of its aims and methods, and that their formal consent to participation would be sought. Towards the end of their second term, students in the group were given a verbal outline of the proposed study, information sheet and sample instructions. They were then invited to consider giving written consent to

  (a) Part 1: the use of information from their questionnaire record;
  (b) Part 2: further participation by writing a reflective account based on that record.

Students could opt to participate in Part 1 only and all participants received a copy of their consent form (see Appendix 3).

Year 1 Psychology students are required to participate in research and may gain credits through the Psychology Department's Research Participation Pool (1 credit for one hour). One hour was allocated to each part of this study. All 13 students in the group agreed to information from their questionnaires being used for Part 1; 3 students also consented to provide a written account for Part 2, of which two were completed.

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues were considered in relation to professional codes and frameworks issued by the British Psychological Association, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and the American Psychological Association. The personal questionnaires used in this project invited participants to disclose personal concerns, some of which were used as the basis for a further reflective account.

The primary ethical issue was whether the processes of disclosure and reflection would have an undue emotional impact on the participant, particularly as a new university student. All members of the group had been informed in their first term about the availability of university support services; the students participating in Part 2, the reflective account, were contacted individually and reminded about those services, including the university counselling service.

A further issue arose from the researcher also being the group tutor and having responsibility for marking assignments during the year. Particular attention was paid to ensuring that there was no actual or implied pressure on students to participate; students were given time between groups to consider participation and gave their consent decisions blind to those of their peers.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

As with the parent study, the analysis here aimed to inform the evaluation of personal questionnaires, as a diagnostic tool and possible guide to student support processes, by reviewing features of the data they provide and in relation to criteria for evaluation identified in the parent study (Appendix 8). To that end, the following procedures were judged to be relevant:

1. The mean frequencies of concerns recorded and words used in each questionnaire were calculated across all participants and presented in graphical comparison with

those of participants at other trial sites in the parent project. These provided a quantitative indication of the power of questionnaires to elicit personal information.

2. Change scores for each concern across all participants were calculated from the difference between initial and final ratings, giving a range from -4 through zero to +4. This illustrated how a qualitative, idiographic measure might be used to provide an evaluation of changes in a common purpose group.

3. Anonymised examples of participant records were presented graphically to illustrate the experience that was captured by personal questionnaires and the variation in student concerns over the project period.

4. The small number (2) of written reflective accounts completed by student participants did not provide sufficient data variation to justify a thematic analysis as intended. Instead, time series data from those two students' questionnaire records were matched to sections of text from their written accounts. This aimed to demonstrate that personal questionnaires are a valid index of personal experience.

5. All participants were invited to complete an evaluation questionnaire (Appendix 5). Apart from the counselling client trial, this is the only trial that had scope for direct participant evaluation and was therefore of particular interest to the overall project.

In considering the outcomes, it may useful to relate the dates of questionnaire ratings to events in the university calendar during the project period, as in Table A.

Table A: Events in the university calendar

Oct 5th 2007	Nov 2nd	Dec 14th	Jan 25th 2008	Feb 29th	April 25th
Teaching starts	Reading Week	Last week of term starts	End of exam period	Exam results published	Pre-Year 1 exams

OUTCOMES

1. Frequencies of concerns and words used

Over the 7 months of the study, 13 student participants recorded a total of 86 concerns, with a range of 3 to 12 concerns per person (mean 6.6). A comparison of this group with other trial sites on the frequency of concerns and words used is shown in Figures A and B.
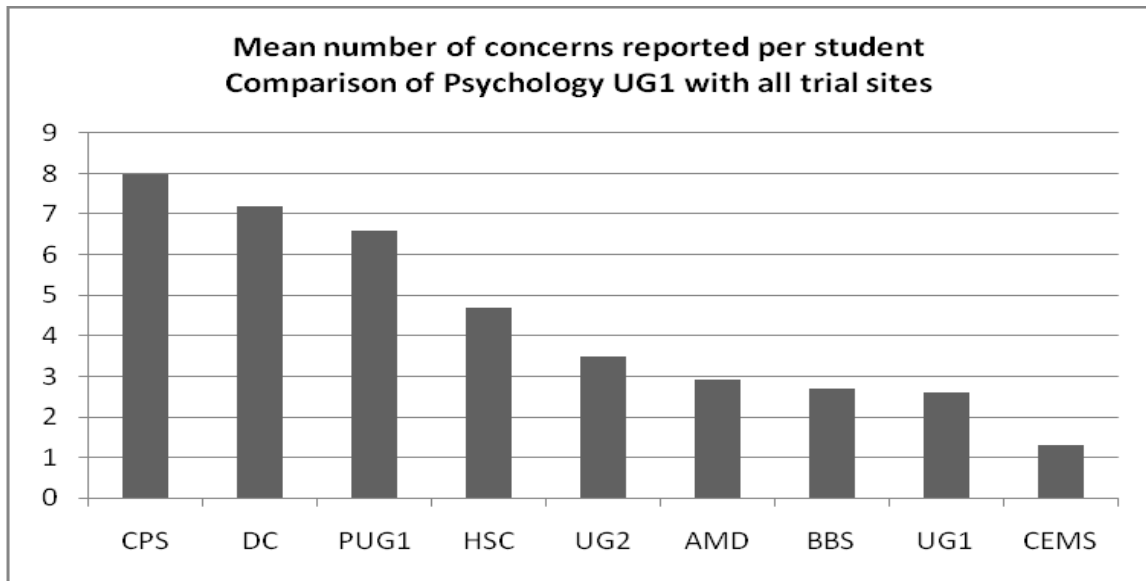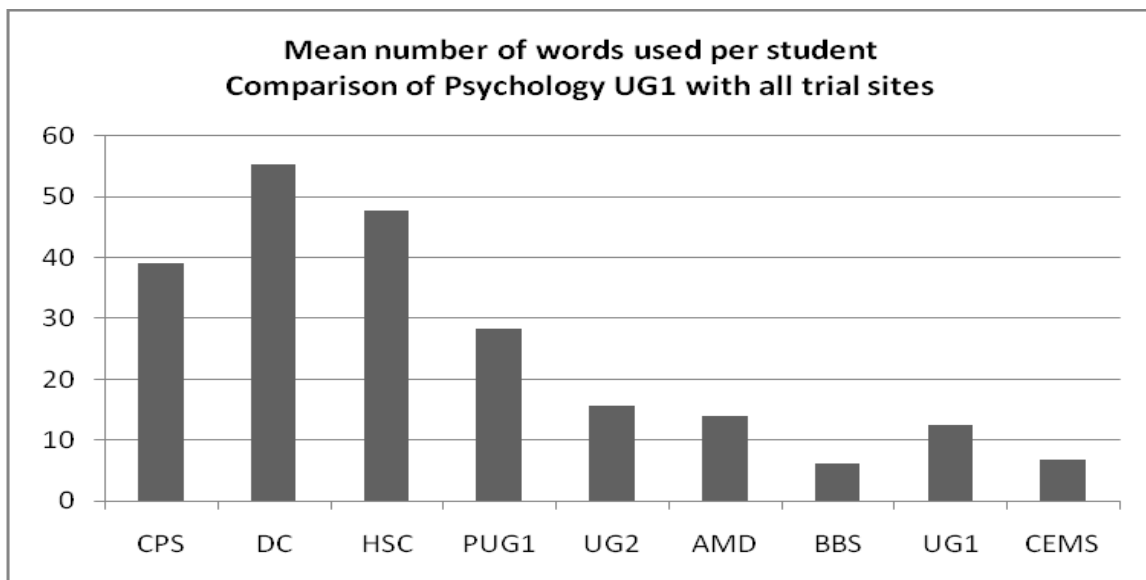
Mean number of concerns reported per student
Comparison of Psychology UG1 with all trial sites

Key: CPS=Counselling clients; DC=Trainee counsellors; HSC=Trainee Physiotherapists;
PUG1=Psychology undergraduates; UG1/UG2=Computer Science undergraduates;
AMD/BBS/CEMS=Students consulting Faculty Student Advisors.

Incoming Psychology undergraduates have a mean frequency of concerns (6.6) which is not far short of those students who are clients of the university counselling service (8.0) and higher than any other undergraduate group in the previous trials.

Figure B

Mean number of words used per student
Comparison of Psychology UG1 with all trial sites

Key: CPS=Counselling clients; DC=Trainee counsellors; HSC=Trainee Physiotherapists;
PUG1=Psychology undergraduates; UG1/UG2=Computer Science undergraduates;
AMD/BBS/CEMS=Students consulting Faculty Student Advisors.

Incoming Psychology undergraduates are more expressive, or articulate, than most other undergraduate groups in the trials, but less so than those training to be physiotherapists and counsellors. However, it is likely that (in all trials) the sentence completion style of the questionnaire does not encourage lengthy or complex sentence construction.

2. Changes in ratings of concerns

The 5-point rating scale on the questionnaire has verbal equivalents ranging from 'Not at all' to 'Very Considerable'. In rating the strength of their concerns, 11 of the 13 participants (86%) made use of either 4 or 5 points of the 5-point rating scale. This suggests that they are using the scale to make meaningful discriminations in their experience.

During the 7 months of the project period, the ratings of 47 out of 86 concerns (54.7%) recorded by all participants changed towards lower levels of concern; 10 (8.6%) changed towards higher levels of concern; 26 concerns (30.2%) were rated as unchanged, or changed and then returned to their initial rating. (Missing values 3.) Change scores for all participant concerns were calculated and are shown graphically in Figure C.

Figure C: Change scores for all participants, October 2007 to April 2008.
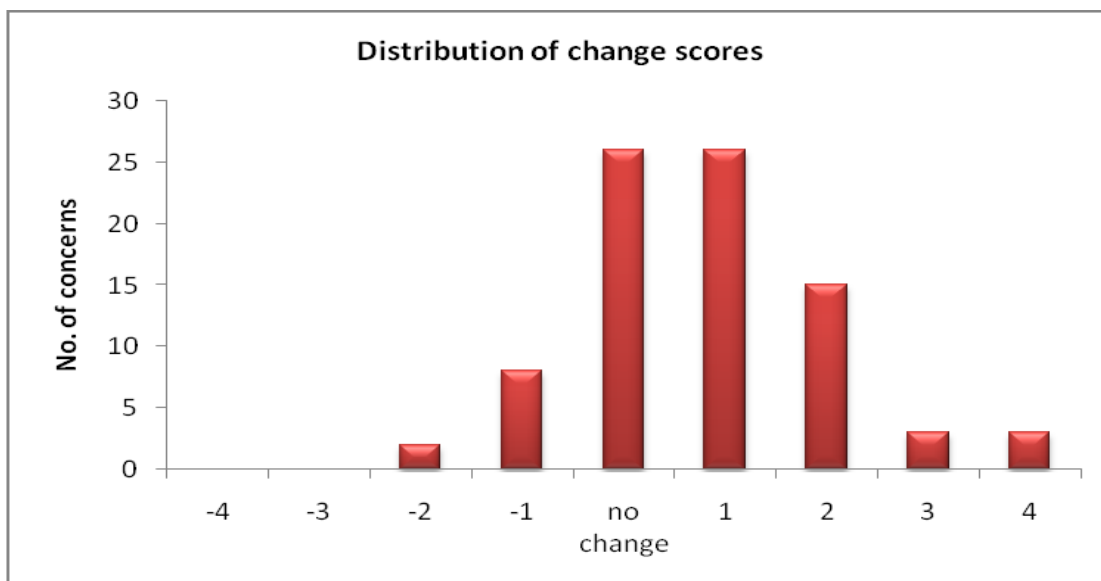
Although it is not personally or statistically meaningful to compare the content and ratings of personal questionnaires across individuals, the aggregation of change scores from a group gives an indication of the magnitude and direction of change within that group.

## 3. Graphical representation of personal questionnaire records

An example of a completed personal questionnaire is given in Appendix 2 and a sample of concerns expressed across the trial group is given in Appendix 6. The time series record of numerical ratings of all concerns, for one participant example, is shown as a cumulative bar chart in Figure D1.

<u>Figure D1</u>
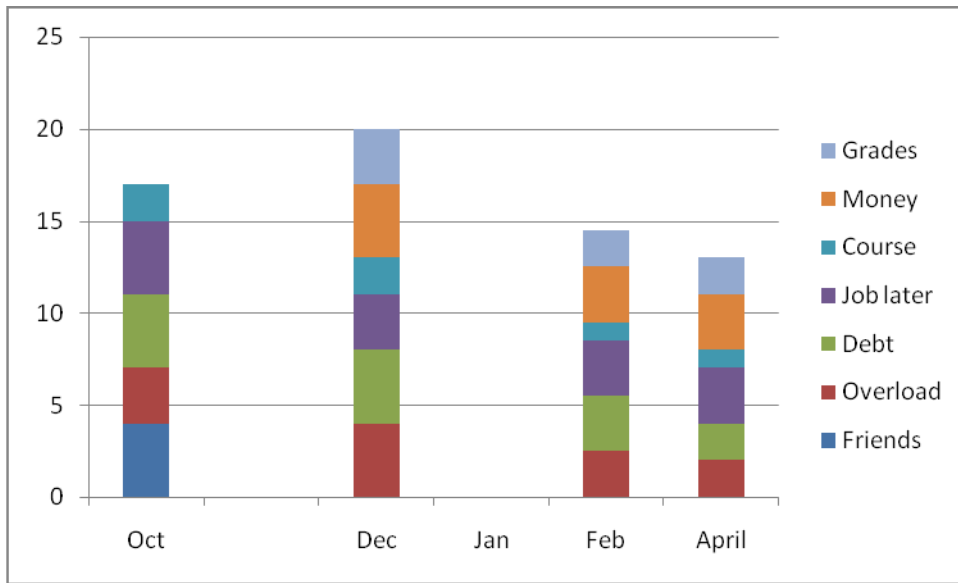
If the data is limited to ratings of 3 and 4 only, i.e. concerns that are described by the student as 'moderate to considerable', or 'considerable to very considerable', a trend is more apparent, as shown in Figure D2.

<u>Figure D2</u>

11
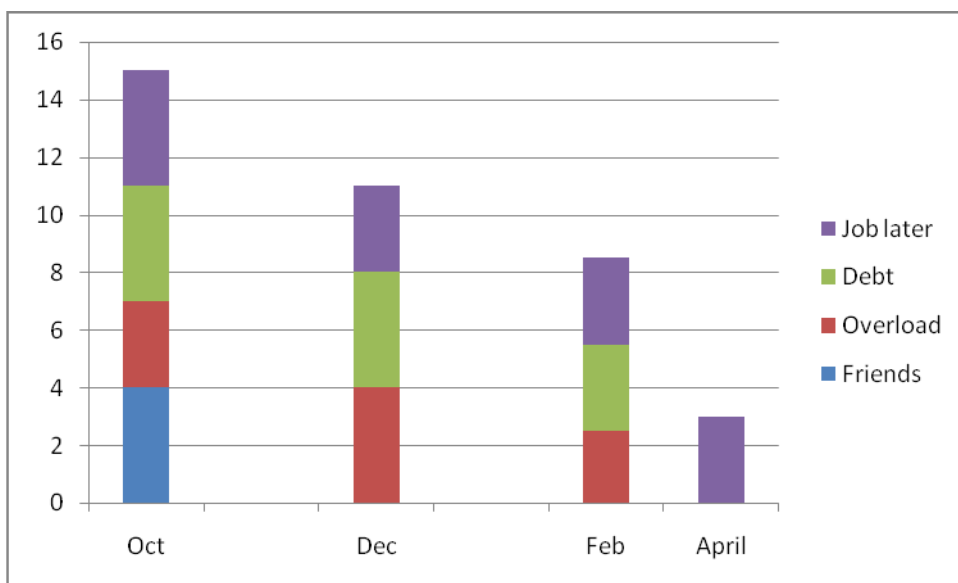
Key to concerns: Job later=That I won't get a decent job afterwards; Debt=That I'll get into loads of debt; Overload=That I'll get overloaded with work; Friends=That I won't make friends.

Although the questionnaires are individualised records, there appear to be some commonalities across participants. For example, one subset of participants (5/13) records a noticeable rise in overall scores and number of concerns in December, shown in Figure D3.

Figure D3
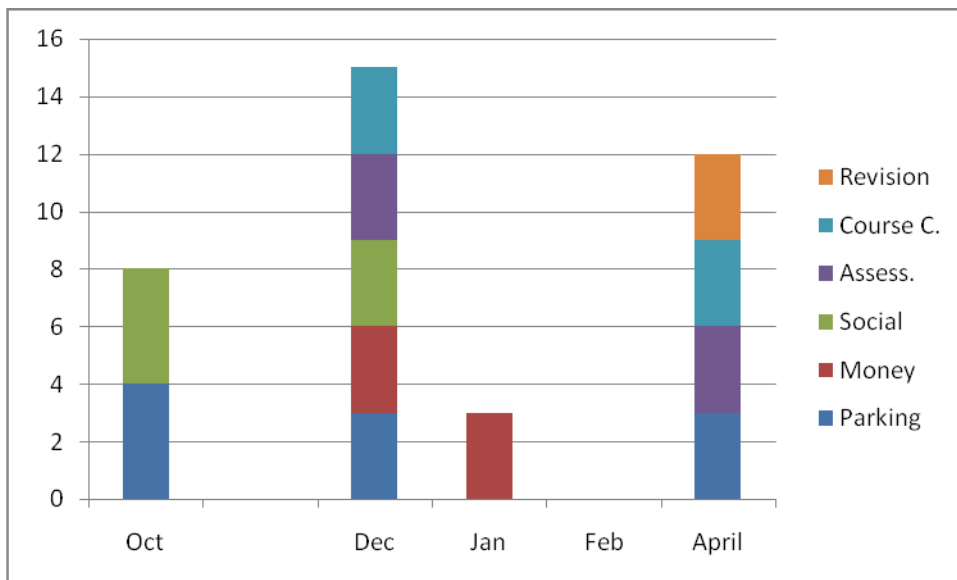
Key to concerns: Course C. = Course content; Assess. = Assessments; Social = Social side.

Observation of all participant records (shown graphically in Appendix 7) suggests that there may be distinct student experience profiles relating to this period in the student life-cycle.   It is not within the project brief to explore these observations but it illustrates the potential of personal questionnaires' to generate hypotheses about the student experience for further enquiry.

4.   Reflective Accounts

Extracts from the written reflective accounts by two participants were linked to their serial ratings of concerns. The accounts provide an elaboration of the student experience that personal questionnaires aim to record and monitor, and enable consideration of the extent to which they are effective in doing so.

Example 1

The complete account, in extracts linked to questionnaire ratings, is reproduced here and demonstrates a correspondence between ratings and the content of the reflective account.

Financial	Ratings:	Oct	Nov	Feb	April
		4	4	1	1

"My biggest worry when I started was financial, I was very aware of not spending a lot of money while going out…."

"To finalise, I think I was right from the start to be worried about my finances. It is hard to keep up with all your expenses and I had to learn to give up certain things in order to save up for more important stuff like rent."

Learning (new format of lessons, assessments, book language)	Ratings:	Oct	Nov	Feb	April
		3	4	1	2

"…..and I started going to lectures with a very healthy approach, very eager to learn and do my revising properly. With time I started to find the format of the lectures and especially the background readings, very hard, that worried me and I felt very put off to do all the readings."

"My persistence in trying to tackle the difficulty of the new format of lessons was successful as I don't find the task so daunting anymore."

Social (juggling studies, going out and having a job)	Ratings:	Oct	Nov	Feb	April
		1	2	2	2

"When I started at UWE I felt excited to be in a new environment and quite frankly I did not feel scared at all to be on my own and having to take new responsibilities."

"I was never too worried about the social side of university life. I've a small group of friends and boyfriend, who takes up a lot of my time, and especially during assessment time I find it almost impossible to socialise."

Experience(working in your area while having *(sic)* at university)	Ratings:	Oct	Nov	Feb	April
		3	3	2	3

"(Also) I got worried after one of the induction lectures in which we were told how important in was to get experience in an area while at university. I contact the Careers department and joined the CVP programme but found it was not helpful at all and felt that no-one could inform me of what was the best thing for me to do. Having no support or guidance I gave up on that and do my own search for work experience."

Example 2

The second reflective account is fuller in detail and relates to a list of concerns that is one of the longest in the group, although only four concerns are rated as 3 or 4 (considerable/very considerable) which is comparable to other participants. The first extracts outline how the student struggled with her approach to money management and its consequences.

Money – running out		Oct	Dec	Feb	April
	Ratings:	3	4	2	2

"….I was constantly worrying about whether I could afford to eat party, buy books, travel (including visits home) and most importantly for any teenage girl, go shopping."

"…I should have taught myself to budget."

"…went through patterns of spending lots of money partying and shopping and then living on a very strict budget until the next student loan came through."

"…felt bad for asking my parents….and so in the effort to do something about it have acquired a job."

These extracts suggest that a concern may periodically diminish while remaining unresolved.

Library – well complicated		Oct	Dec	Feb	April
	Ratings:	3	2	4	2

"I completely didn't understand the system, how to find books etc which was a major worry."

"I am not as concerned as I should be as I find the reading provided on the internet enough to get by in essays."

"…this will not be the same in the second and third year and so I need to learn to use the library to find books to reference from etc. In order to do this I should probably get a student card so that I can enter the library in the first place."

In these extracts, concerns did not arise until near the end of the first term.

Crap grades		Oct	Dec	Feb	April
	Ratings:	-	3	2	2

"…I was also concerned about achieving poor grades and not passing my first year."

"I regard the first year slightly as a doss year because you only need forty percent to pass."

"…because I know this there is less pressure on me and I don't need to push myself..."

"If I want to achieve higher I am aware I should try harder and push myself to achieve higher grades."

On the basis of the written accounts, students starting at university are involved in emotional adjustment, internal conflict resolution, changes in perspective and skills acquisition. These extracts suggest that personal questionnaires can provide accurate serial indicators of that development but may not convey the complexity of underlying processes.

5. Student Evaluations

When participants were asked to review their concern ratings each month, the researcher's observation was that the request was complied with without comment or question as to the

purpose and value of the activity.   At the end of the 7-month project period, 11 out of 13 participants completed a paper evaluation in the last session of the Facilitated Learning Group and a week after their final questionnaire ratings.   A summary of their responses is given in Table B.

Table B: Summary of evaluation responses

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Relevant to me	0	9	1	1	0
Easy to use	2	9	0	0	0
Helpful	0	6	2	3	0
Totals	2	24	3	4	0

Out of a total of 33 responses to all evaluation statements, 26 (78.8%) responded 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree'; 3 (9.1%) responded 'Neither Agree nor Disagree'; 4 (12%) responded 'Disagree'; none responded 'Strongly Disagree'.

Participants' comments on the relevance of the personal questionnaire included *"Allows me to evaluate my problems"* and *"It was a way to monitor my progress",* but also *"I did not think about it once I had filled it in".*

Comments on ease of use included *"It is laid out well and easy to understand"; "It's quick to do and using a 1-4 scale makes it easier to answer"; "It's straightforward".* There were no negative comments on this aspect of the questionnaire.

Positive comments on the helpfulness of the personal questionnaire included *"It makes me more aware of areas I need to focus on"* and *"It allowed me to reflect on my progress over the year".* Negative comments included *"It doesn't help"* and *"My views did not change much during the year".*

In summary, for the majority of participants personal questionnaires were relevant and easy to use. However, the group were divided as to whether they are helpful to them, returning the most statements indicating disagreement or neutrality. Participants' comments on the relevance of the questionnaires indicate that they are clear about their potential, but it is less clear whether they actually made use of them to identify, reflect on, address or monitor aspects of their university experience.

DISCUSSION

This supplementary project aimed to further explore the value of personal questionnaires with students in higher education. The trial described here differed from those in the parent study in two ways: the student participants were members of a Facilitated Learning Group led by the researcher as tutor, and all used personal questionnaires to record serial (rather than single) ratings of personal concerns during their first two terms at university.

The data obtained was analysed and presented so as to offer perspectives on the use and value of personal questionnaires and in relation to criteria for evaluation. Outcomes showed that Level 1 psychology undergraduates were able to use personal questionnaires to express their concerns to an extent that is comparable to students in other trial settings. Consideration of serial ratings over the period of the project showed that personal concerns are dynamic; for example, change scores across the group showed that while the majority of concerns decreased over the project period, a substantial minority remained unchanged.

Graphical presentation of individual questionnaire records highlighted priority concerns and showed trends in student experience. Consideration of trends across the group suggested different profiles of experience for first year students; these would need to be confirmed by trials with a larger student cohort. Although not designed to explore group variables the presence of apparently common responses and patterns across individual records can, as here, suggest areas for further enquiry.

Provided that the author is authentically engaged in the process, it is assumed that their personal questionnaire provides a valid sampling of experience. The parent study suggested that responses may be valid but incomplete, that their validity may be influenced by an indifferent or inconsistent attitude to the process, by a reluctance to disclose personal information, or by difficulty in applying numerical ratings to personal experience. When students in this trial were asked to rate their concerns at monthly intervals the researcher's view of the students' indifference to the procedure was that the group regarded it as a routine administrative task of no great consequence. Whether this was actually the case the presence of trends in the data, and perhaps the degree of variation in scoring, supports the view that students were registering actual changes in their concerns, that this was a meaningful rather than a random process.

The interpretation of personal questionnaire data is primarily a matter for its author, although Bilsbury and Richmond (2002, p.31) use the term *'Consensual validity'* to describe the process in therapeutic settings whereby practitioner and client agree on the meaning of questionnaire responses. In a student setting it would be equally necessary to clarify the meaning of individual concerns as a prelude to considering support options. For example, in this trial 'money' and related terms ('debt', 'finance') were the most common concern, featuring in every participant record. From the data available, several meanings were being conveyed:

      (a) An actual shortage of money; or

      (b) Worries about managing money; or

      (c) Not being able to shop at pre-university levels when in salaried employment.

Individual support options to be considered here might involve reviewing finance options, training in budgeting skills, and revising expectations, respectively.

In this trial it was not known which participants made use of student services relating to their concerns, or which concerns abated without intervention. In this respect it may be helpful to consider the relevance to student services of 'watchful waiting' (NICE 2006), a deliberate absence of intervention used in health settings where the initial course of a disease or condition is uncertain.   'Watchful waiting' involves the serial evaluation of symptom states in order to monitor natural processes of recovery before proposing external intervention.

The question that student services staff may raise is whether it is ethical to withhold support from a student in the anticipation that their concerns will (as counselling waiting list data indicates for example) often subside and resolve without intervention, though at the expense of personal distress and possible academic disruption.   But there may be a case to be made for offering waiting-list clients a weekly evaluation of their concerns in order that they can benefit from the observation of any remission (e.g. Frank 1962, 1991) as well as focussing extra-therapeutic activity.

The linkage of extracts from reflective accounts to serial records of concerns also gave some support for the view that personal questionnaires provide a valid index of self-concerns, although obtaining only two - albeit quite different - accounts limits the strength of that support. A weakness of the procedure for written accounts was that participants were working with their complete questionnaire record and may have engaged in rationalisation of the record in their accounts. However, the accounts of first year experiences offered a

greater depth of disclosure than questionnaire items, and conveyed something of the dynamic relationships between personal characteristics and university experiences.

The parent study suggested that factors which support the use of personal questionnaires include 'an orientation to self-understanding, the presence of a facilitative relationship, an optimal level of arousal, and the availability of time to reflect' (p.37). Arguably, those motivational factors were present in the participant group of undergraduates who were paying increased university fees, who had in most cases chosen to come to UWE and who had in most cases stated a strong desire to become professional psychologists; who reported that they often sat together for company in their 200-seat lectures, helped each other out with work, and attended a weekly academic support group led by an experienced counselling psychologist.

Conversely, group sessions were held over Friday lunch-time when students often reported being tired and under pressure from programme attendance requirements at that end of the week. Although attendance at this compulsory module was high, active participation in the sessions by most members of the group was low. (Two students commented privately to the researcher about their peers that 'they're rather quiet aren't they?'). All participants were noticeably more engaged and articulate in individual tutorials, where some students volunteered that they found the sessions boring, or irrelevant, or would have preferred to spend the time working independently.

At the end of the module, faculty evaluation procedures indicated a fairly low level of satisfaction with the module, in contrast to a largely positive evaluation of personal questionnaires. If there was a bias to the latter, it may have been that the end of the module and a positive tutor-student relationship caused participants to favour the tutor's research - which required little effort once a month - as opposed to the university's weekly module, boring and irrelevant to some at least.

Participants were positive about questionnaires' ease of use and relevance but expressed mixed views about their helpfulness. There were some general comments about how the questionnaire had been helpful but the evaluation overall would have benefited from asking for specific examples of benefits. At the start of the project, participants were given no expectation about how questionnaire use would be helpful other than to 'guide reflections on their university experience', and were given no advice as to how this might occur. Key

questions arising here and from the parent study are how personal questionnaires are presented to students, what expectations are conveyed about their value to student development, and how issues arising from their use are negotiated by or with students and staff.

Comments about the method of scaling concerns were positive, whereas the parent study had received suggestions from university staff that rating scales might be longer (e.g. 0 to 100) to allow for greater sensitivity to change, or might use visual analogue or other non-numerical approaches to scaling. There was insufficient evidence to explain a few participants' restricted range and variation in serial ratings; whether it reflected a response bias caused by indifference to the activity, or an actual sense of limited variation in personal experience, or a limited ability to perceive change in personal experience. In a clinical setting, the latter two would be a cause of some concern; the parent study noted (p.37) that some students are reluctant to disclose or discuss personal information and concerns, or to seek professional help for those.

The literature on self-report methods in higher education relates largely to student academic self-assessment but offers some points of comparison to the current trial. Andrade and Du (2007), in a qualitative study of student experiences of self-assessment, suggested that self-assessment 'involves a complex process of internalization and self-regulation' (p.159). That this is not an easy process for students or staff is reported by Trotter (2006) in a study of continuous summative assessment with undergraduates, and Fitzpatrick (2006) in a trial of a self-assessment strategy with nursing students. They both describe the time-consuming nature of the process and its challenge for students, but conclude that these are outweighed by the benefits to student learning.

In a study of how students interpreted questionnaires used for evaluating teaching, Robinson (2004) suggested that the observed variability in their responses was influenced by students' overall feelings that 'often encompass events in their everyday lives, beyond the confines of the university module or course they are attending' (p.677). He also referred to Kember and Wong's (2000) argument that there are ''passive' students who prefer a transmissive type of instruction and 'active' students who prefer a variety of teaching approaches and a more participative environment' (ibid. p.676).

Although they refer to standardised survey questionnaires, both of these factors may influence students' use of personal questionnaires. Further, Robinson's study found that asking students to explain the reasons for their scoring caused them to revise their scores, presumably as a result of that focussed reflection. This is comparable to the dialogue that occurs between therapist and client where clarification of the meaning of initial self-assessment can be therapeutic, as well as indicating the focus of therapeutic intervention. Again, the issue of student engagement with self-reflection carries over from the parent project: how motivational factors (above), expectations and perhaps student group dynamics facilitate or obstruct the use of personal questionnaires.

One approach to the challenges of engagement has been indicated by the MacELLI project (McMahon, Morrison-Love & Deakin 2004) using the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI 2007)*,* a self-report questionnaire that helps students to identify dimensions of their 'learning power'. In this project, online self-appraisal was followed by a stepped process of engagement with trained staff through open lectures, workshops and individual tutorials, as chosen by the student. This is a structure for engagement in reflective practices that appears to be student-centred, flexible and economic.

The current and previous trials of personal questionnaires have been conducted in the overlap of educational and therapeutic domains where student support tends to be located. In considering the background to the parent project, there was some discussion of the contrasting values of idiographic and nomothetic approaches to psychological enquiry (pp.6-9) and both are represented in the domain literature.

Factor or trait based approaches to the student experience have a long history, particularly in North America (a recently published example being the 'University Student Hassles Scale', Pett and Johnson 2005). They continue to multiply largely untested in the wider field with the result that there are many inventories and little guidance as to the most (psychometrically) valid and reliable for everyday use. Outside research and specialist clinical settings, they appear to have made little impact on student services in UK higher education although it has been suggested that they may be useful for screening some student variables (parent study p.39). Despite a mass education system, it is the researcher's experience that there is a persistent orientation to the student as individual and reluctance to use diagnostic-type categories to guide support.

In therapeutic settings, including student counselling, there is a slow but growing interest in the use of idiographic tools (e.g. Ashworth 2007) and arguments for the benefits of systematic evaluation such as from the current President of the American Psychological Association (Kazdin 1993, 2007). It is likely that the increased requirement for accountability is one driver, but a compelling argument for practitioners is that systematic, client-focussed recording can ensure an appropriate, research-based and responsive service. The current trial has offered some perspectives on the value of personal questionnaires in achieving those ends for the support of students in higher education.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This trial broadly supported the outcomes of the parent study while illustrating the greater information and possibilities provided by the serial evaluation of student experience. A personal questionnaire offers a text-free, self-report format for identifying and reviewing personal concerns; it is a simple and immediate tool but depends for its utility on the active engagement of the user and of supporting personnel. Moving forward from previous recommendations, the integration and use of personal questionnaires in HE settings might well prioritise the following applications:

1. As a research tool to explore the student experience and its development, possibly within an action research framework;

2. As a tool for self-appraisal and reflection to be used within tutorial settings, facilitated learning groups or similar settings where there is student-staff engagement;

3. As per its original clinical format, to provide systematic evaluation of counselling processes and related psychological support.

This trial completes the appraisal of personal questionnaires as a guide to student support processes, as originally planned.

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SEARCH RECORD   (Ovid / PsychInfo database including APA PsychArticles)

<u>Keywords</u>

clinimetrics

student / + profiles / + support

college student development

counselling / student counselling / therapy with students

questionnaires / + personal / + evaluation / + self-evaluation / + idiographic / + self-report

assessment / + counselling / + therapy / + student counselling

self-assessment / + students / + student counselling

student / + self-monitoring / + self-report

evaluation / + serial / + systematic / + psychometric

student experience / + university / + evaluating / +monitoring / + measurement

APPENDIX 1   SUMMARY OF PARENT PROJECT

EVALUATING A PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE METHOD FOR THE APPRAISAL OF STUDENT CONCERNS: A PILOT STUDY

The aim of this project was to evaluate the use of personal questionnaires as a form of enquiry into the individual experience of university students, and as a possible guide to student support processes. The general background to the work is a university initiative to develop research into student counselling and psychological support, within which the project starts to address the systematic understanding of student needs and concerns.

A rationale for the use of personal questionnaires with student populations was considered in comparison with features of psychometric approaches to the assessment of psychological variables in clinical and educational settings. This pilot study intended to explore how students engage with personal questionnaires in a range of university settings, and to obtain evaluations of participating students and associated staff relating to the impact, relevance and utility of personal questionnaires.

Trials of personal questionnaire formats were conducted in three academic and four support sites over a three-month period in the latter half of the academic year. One hundred and seventeen students participated in questionnaire trials on two university campuses; eleven staff in advisory and counselling settings participated in evaluation interviews. Outcomes were analysed using descriptive statistics of questionnaire use and a content summary of semi-structured interviews.

Allowing for the stated limitations of the project, including the small quantity of student feedback, the findings suggest that personal questionnaires enable students to present an authentic account of experiences subject to the influence of personal and contextual variables.   Interview data suggest that these include level of emotional arousal, the motivation to engage in self-reflection, and the availability of a reflective space or facilitating relationship.

Based on these findings, proposals are made for more extensive and specific research into personal questionnaire use with students; and for consideration of their integration as elements in the overall appraisal of student support.

APPENDIX 2: Example of personal questionnaire used with GDP group (reconstructed from separate data items).

Note that each rating was made blind to previous ratings.

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE RECORD FOR: XXXX

	My concerns about being at university are (write one in each box):	Oct 5	Nov 11	Dec 12	Jan 25 2008	Feb 2	April 25
A	Money	2	3	2	2	2	1
B	Being different in my experiences	2	2	2	3	2	1
C	Balance between academic work and social life	1	2	3	2	2	2
D	Travel	2	2	3	3	1	2
E	Meeting new people	4	2	3	1	2	2
F	Assessments	1	2	3	2	1	3
H	That I'll get overloaded with work	3	3	3	3	2	3
I	Not understanding the work	3	2	3	3	1	1
J							

For each statement, rate the strength of your concern as follows:

Not at all	Very slight	Slight to moderate	Moderate to considerable	Very considerable
Score **0**	Score **1**	Score **2**	Score **3**	Score **4**

APPENDIX 3

![University of the West of England, Bristol logo]

Personal questionnaire evaluation project
INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

This project is being conducted by Phil Topham, a Counselling Psychologist in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences. It is part of a larger project to evaluate personal questionnaires in various student settings across the university.   It has the approval of the University Research Ethics Committee; the research findings will be reported internally and in relevant external literature.

What you are asked to do

This project is two parts:

Part 1: In your Psychology Connected group, you have made periodic entries on a personal questionnaire over the last six months.

Part 2: The attached instructions ask you to reflect on and write about those entries.

Depending on the consent you give, information from Part 1 with or without Part 2 will be used by the project.

Giving consent to participate

Before agreeing to participate in this research project, please note that you are under no obligation to do so and that it will not affect your university progression or entitlements if you decline to participate. You do not have to give a reason for declining to participate. If you do agree to take part, please also note that:

  i.   You may withdraw from participation at any time;

  ii.   You may ask for any information about you to be withdrawn from the project;

  iii. There is no need to identify yourself on any of the documents used in the research;

  iv.   Any information that you provide will be kept in confidence by the researcher and will be destroyed after three years;

  v.   Information in research reports will be presented so that individual participants cannot be identified.

Before you agree to take part in this project, please read the 'Instructions to participants', attached.

I have read and understood the information provided.   I agree to take part in ONLY PART 1 / PART 1 AND PART 2 of the research project under the terms described.
(delete as appropriate)

Please sign here:

Please print your name:

(This is for the purposes of university auditing of research procedures. It will not be attached to the research information that you provide).

Signature of researcher:

Research Participation
Psychology undergraduates in year 1 can gain up to 6 credits for participation in research. 1 credit is given for each hour of participation. To gain credits you need to register your participation in this study with the Research Participation Pool.

APPENDIX 4

University of the West of England
BRISTOL
UWE

Personal questionnaire evaluation project
INSTRUCTIONS TO PARTICIPANTS

Since you started at UWE you have made periodic entries on a personal questionnaire, a paper summary of which has been provided to you.   As a participant in this second stage of the project, allow yourself an undisturbed hour to complete this activity:

1. Think back to how you felt about university when you started here at UWE;

2. Reflect on the record of your concerns and their numerical ratings on your questionnaire summary;

3. Considering the concerns recorded on the questionnaire, write an account of the period covered by the questionnaire, particularly

   o The personal impact and meaning of the concerns you recorded;
   o Your views on any change in concerns over the period;
   o Anything that helped or hindered a change in your concerns.

   You may find this process informative and interesting but if there are things that you do not wish to write about you do not need to include them in your written account.

4. Save a copy for yourself and return your written account to Phil Topham in 3A1, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences.

If you have any queries about the procedure or about any other aspect of the research, please email me: Phil.Topham@uwe.ac.uk or telephone me on 0117 32 82294.
If you would like to read the report of the completed research, please indicate where I may contact you:

Thank-you for your help.

APPENDIX 5   Personal Questionnaire Evaluation Form

Personal questionnaire evaluation

1. Please complete this in relation to the personal questionnaire that you have been using in your Psychology Connected group.

2. For each statement on the left, circle the word or phrase on the right that best describes your opinion.

3. For each statement, give the reason for your opinion.

The personal questionnaire is relevant to me	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Because:					
The personal questionnaire is easy to use	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Because:					
The personal questionnaire is helpful	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Because:					

APPENDIX 6: <u>Examples of concerns expressed at the start of Year 1</u>

Money
Too many essays to do in a short period of time
Cooking and cleaning
Having not done A level
Not being able to understand
Meeting new people
That I won't get a decent job afterwards
That the course isn't what I expected
Getting behind with work
Missing people
Library – well complicated
Not getting on with lecturers
Losing motivation
New format of lessons
Settling down
Work experience

APPENDIX 7: Summary of graphical representations of personal questionnaires

(Fully annotated graphical records are held by the author for consultation if required..)
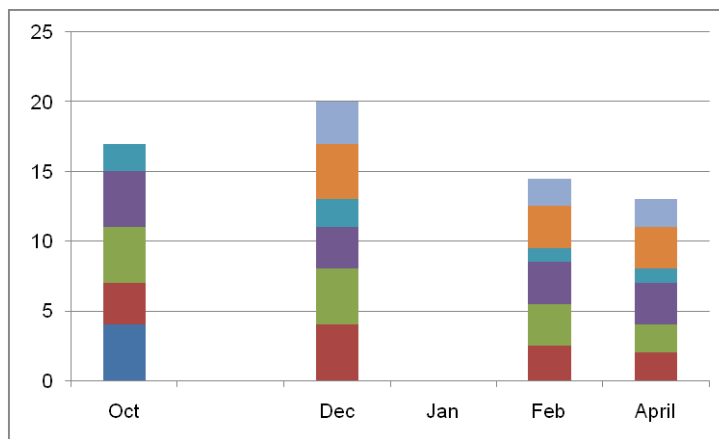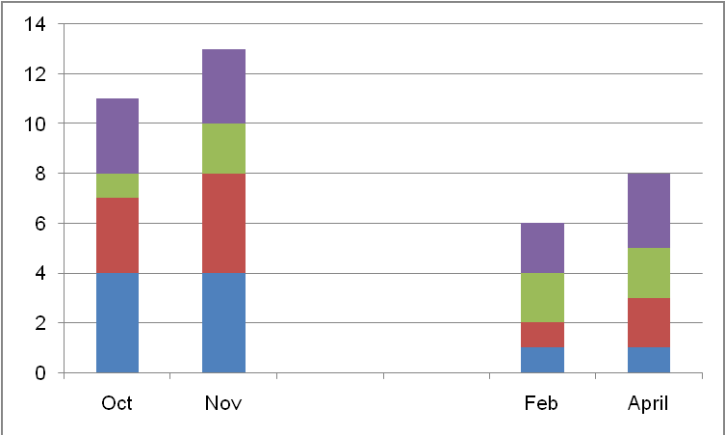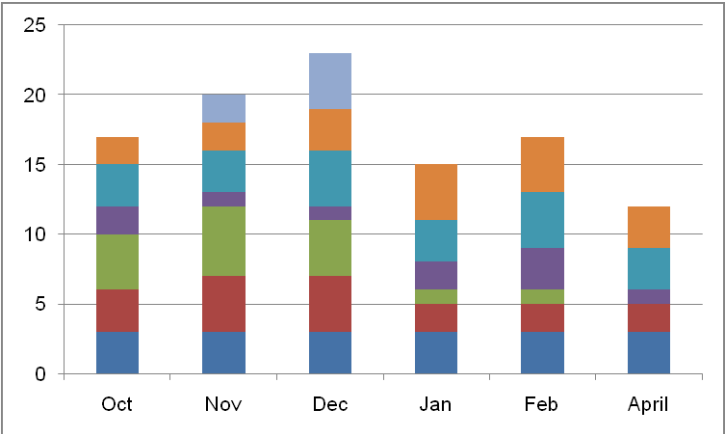
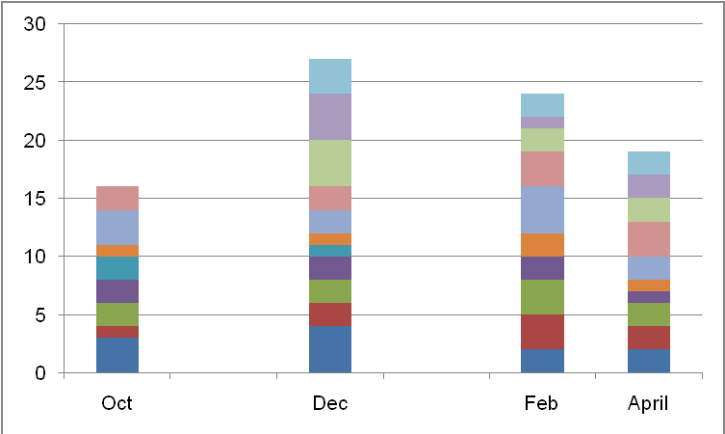**Overall concerns reducing**
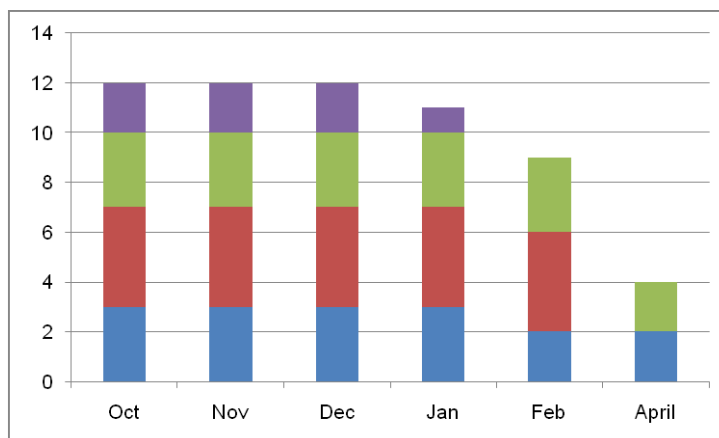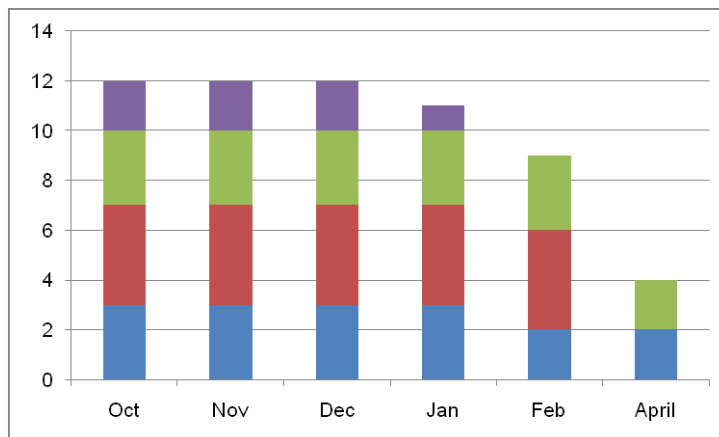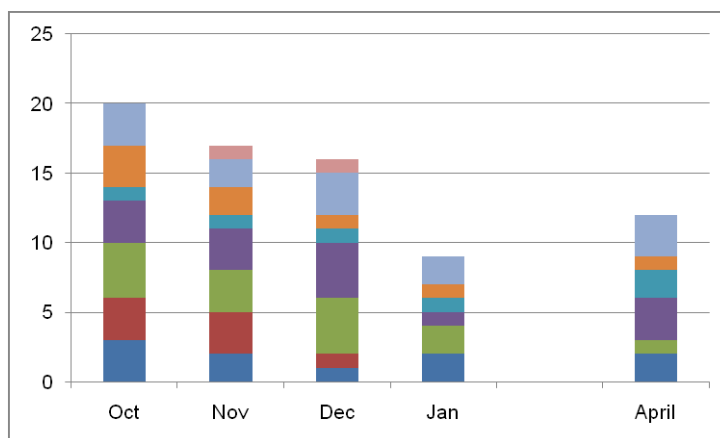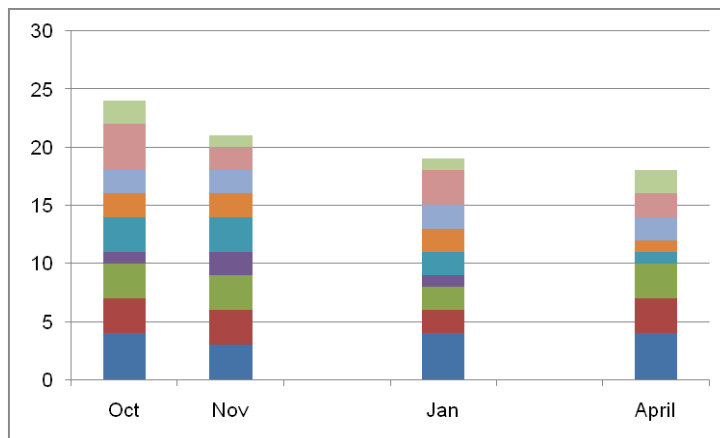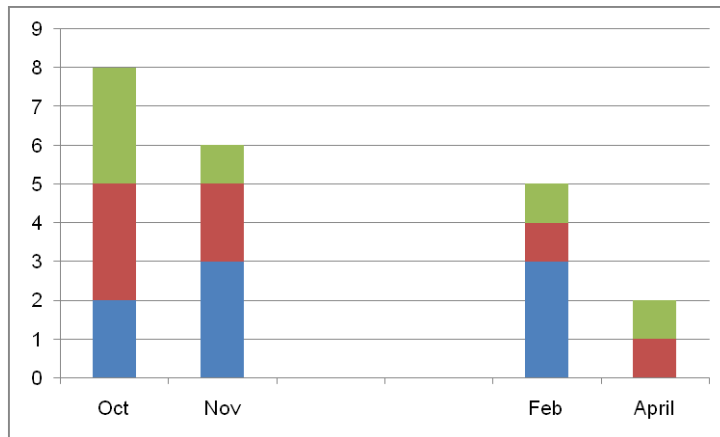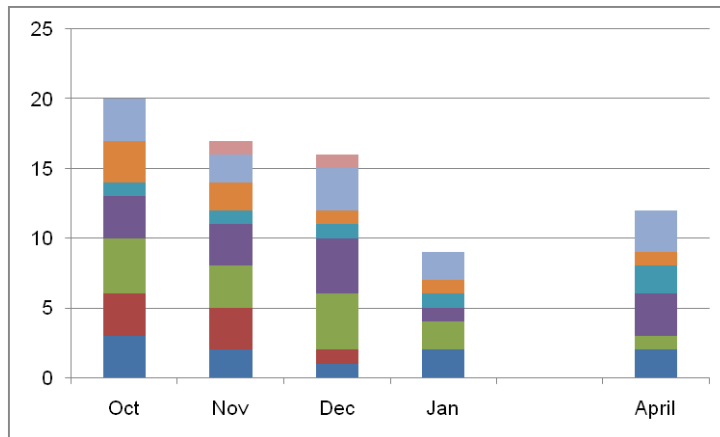
Overall concerns increasing
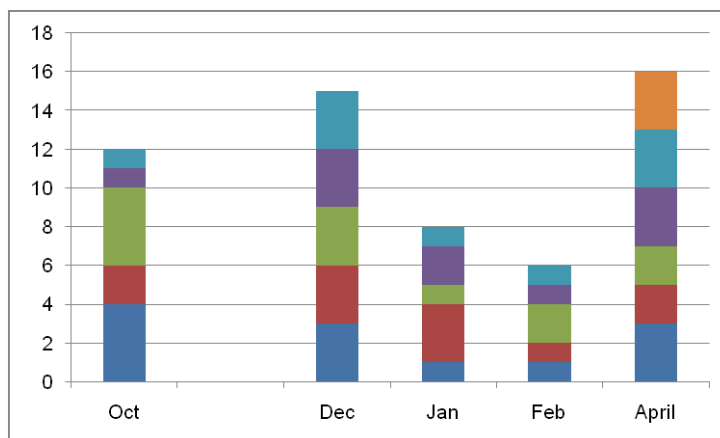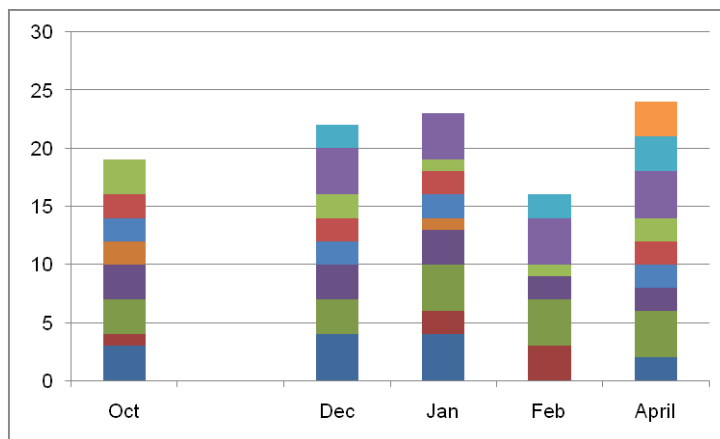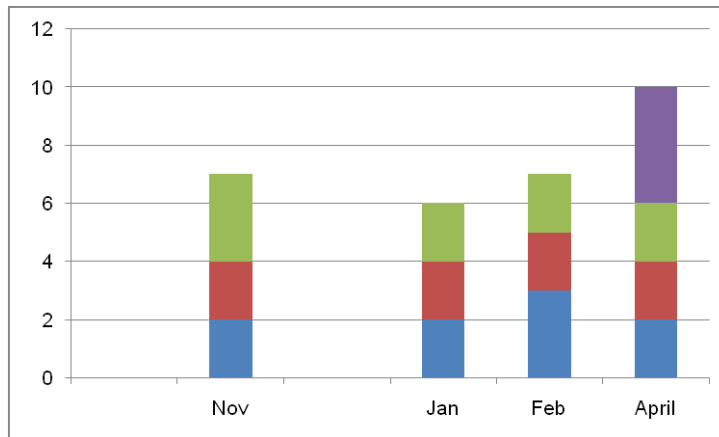
Overall concerns increasing then falling
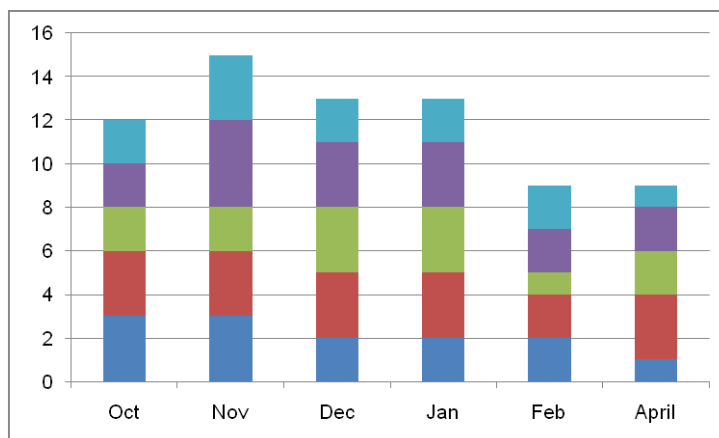
APPENDIX 8:   Criteria for evaluating personal questionnaires

The parent project (p.19) proposed that the following evaluation criteria (collated from Fitzpatrick et al 1998, Bilsbury and Richman 2002) would be appropriate for personal questionnaires:

i.   Acceptability: the extent to which respondents understand and support its use; whether respondents have concerns about its emotional impact and confidentiality;

ii.   Appropriateness: that it is suitably matched to the specific purposes and questions to be addressed;

iii. Feasibility, or practicality: how easily, in time and effort, it can be used and scored;

iv.   Interpretability: how meaningful are the scores;

v.   Precision: the number and accuracy of distinctions that can be made;

vi.   Reliability: whether it enables the respondent to give a consistent account of experience over short periods of time;

vii. Responsiveness: whether it can measure meaningful changes in personal experience;

viii. Suitability: its ability to mesh with user characteristics such as cultural diversity, intellectual ability, reading level and emotional state whilst tapping the area of interest;

ix.   Validity or directness: whether it enables the respondent to provide an authentic account and rating of personal experience;

x.   Value or utility: whether it is perceived to be useful in forwarding the interests of respondents.