



Celebrating the Contribution of Programme Assistants

A review of 30 years of work

The Quaker Council for European Affairs

Produced by the Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA)

This short paper is based on a survey of former staff employed by QCEA in the capacities of Volunteer, Programme Assistant, Junior Programme Assistant and Researcher. The survey was carried out during the first half of 2009 and covers staff who contributed to QCEA between 1979 and 2008. The survey was designed by Martina Weitsch and Liz Scurfield, conducted by Martina Weitsch and the report was compiled by Martina Weitsch and Liz Scurfield. We would like to thank former Representatives who helped us to track down contact details and we would like to thank all those who took the trouble to respond to the questionnaire.

The Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA) was founded in 1979 to promote the values of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in the European context. Our purpose is to express a Quaker vision in matters of peace, human rights, and economic justice. QCEA is based in Brussels and is an international, not-for-profit organisation under Belgian Law.

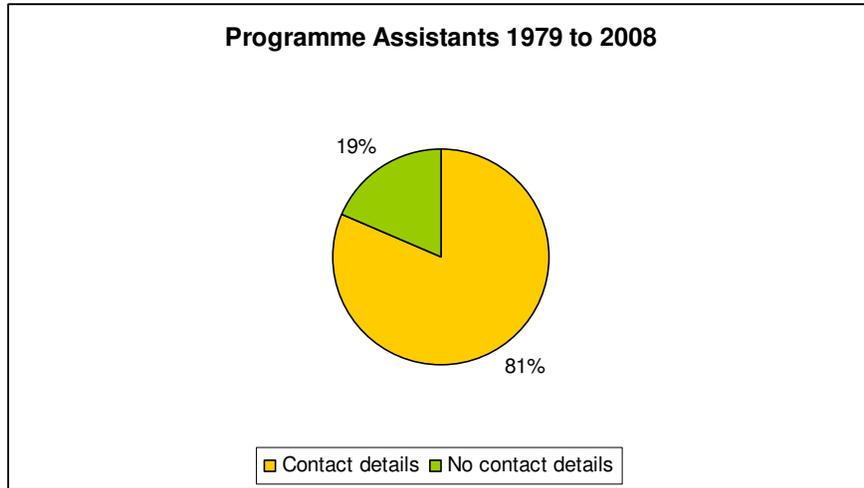
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Table of Contents

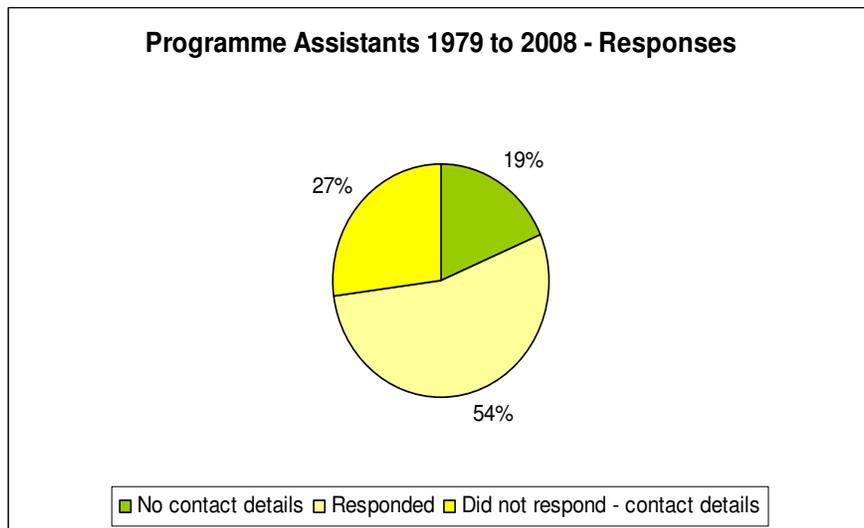
- Celebrating the Contribution of Programme Assistants 2**
 - An overview of those who responded 3
 - Key areas of work..... 4
 - What was important? What was good? 6
 - Connections with Quakers and Quakerism before and after working at QCEA 7
 - Where do they go from here?..... 10
 - Volunteering - a continuing aspect of life?..... 11
 - Ongoing contacts 11
 - The QCEA experience! 12
 - Finally..... 12

Celebrating the Contribution of Programme Assistants

From the very beginning of the Quaker Council for European Affairs in 1979, the organisation and the Representatives have always been supported by younger people referred to variously as volunteers or Programme Assistants. In the early days they were volunteers in the sense of not being paid a salary. This changed over time, and the role is now firmly established as a (generally) 1 year paid internship. The title used for this position for many years now is Programme Assistant and this is the term used in this paper throughout.



Over the last 30 years, QCEA has had at least 59 Programme Assistants. This number probably misses out a few; in particular some of the volunteers in the very early years who stayed in Quaker House for a relatively short period of time may have slipped through the net.

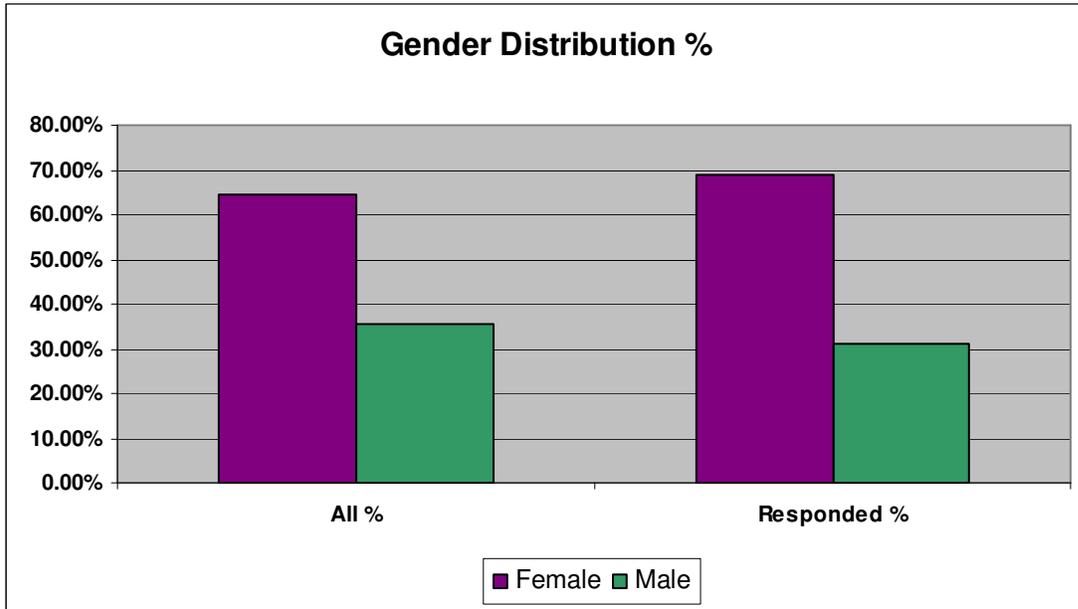


The QCEA office has contact details for 48 of the 59 we know of; of these, 32 responded to a questionnaire sent out to them during the early months of 2009 to find out a little about them and their experience in preparation for the 30th anniversary celebrations.

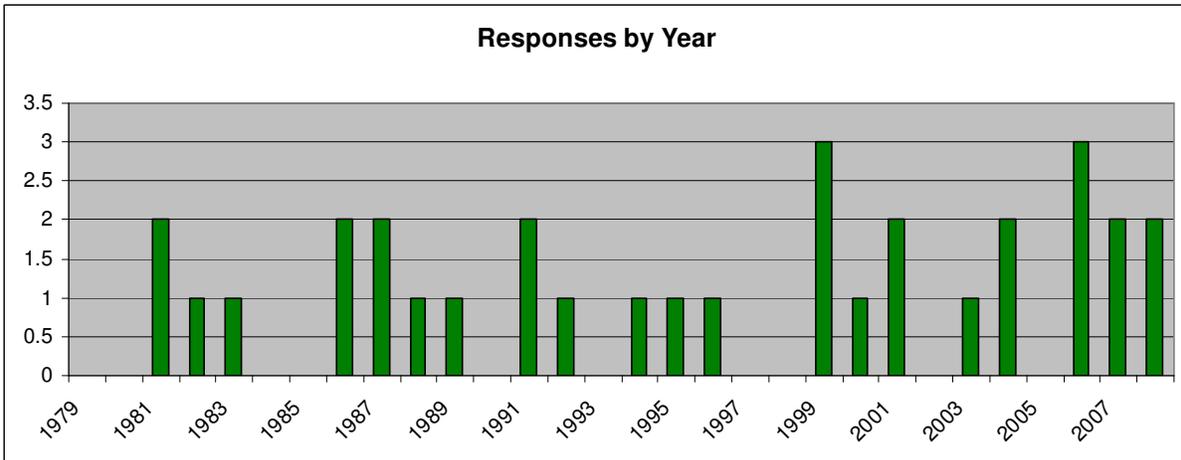
Because they all contributed to QCEA’s work over a relatively short time, there has never been any substantial reflection about the contribution they have made or, indeed, the contribution QCEA and their experience here has made to their lives. The survey, and this report of the findings, is intended to set this right.

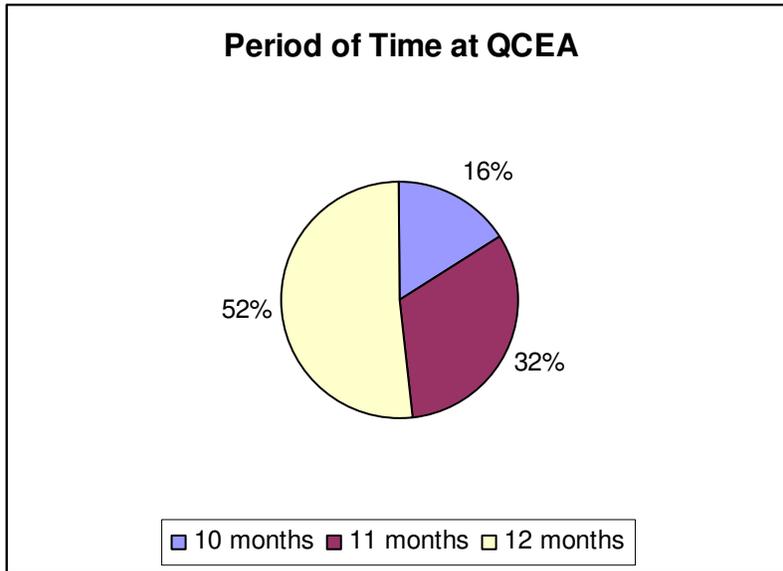
An overview of those who responded

The proportion of men to women who have served QCEA in these roles has been around 1 to 2 and the proportion of men to women responding to the questionnaire is very similar. In terms of overall numbers there have been 38 women and 21 men who have worked for QCEA as Programme Assistants and 22 women and 10 men who responded to our survey.



In terms of the distribution over time of Programme Assistants who responded, the picture is slightly skewed in favour of more recent Programme Assistants. This is not surprising but there are still enough of those who served QCEA in the earlier years to give a reasonably rounded picture.





Finally, looking at the length of time Programme Assistants worked for QCEA, there is a fairly consistent picture of between 10 and 12 months, with just a few who served for shorter periods and one or two who devoted considerably more time to the work at QCEA. The shortest period of service of anyone responding was six months, the longest was 4 years. The distribution between those working here for 10 to 12 months is shown in this graph.

Whilst the majority of those who have served as Programme Assistants, and the majority of those who responded, are from Britain, some of them are not. Among the responses were some from the Netherlands, Germany, the US, Australia, Norway and Sweden. In the case of recent Programme Assistants from Australia and the US, they had dual nationality, one of which at least was an EU nationality which permitted us to employ them. It is a matter of regret to QCEA that we are unable to employ young people from outside the European Union and European Economic Area unless they have dual nationality of this kind; an attempt to obtain a work permit in one case led to a refusal on appeal.

Key areas of work

Ongoing Tasks

There are some ongoing tasks which Programme Assistants undertake each year and those responding to the survey showed a fair distribution of these. These areas are:

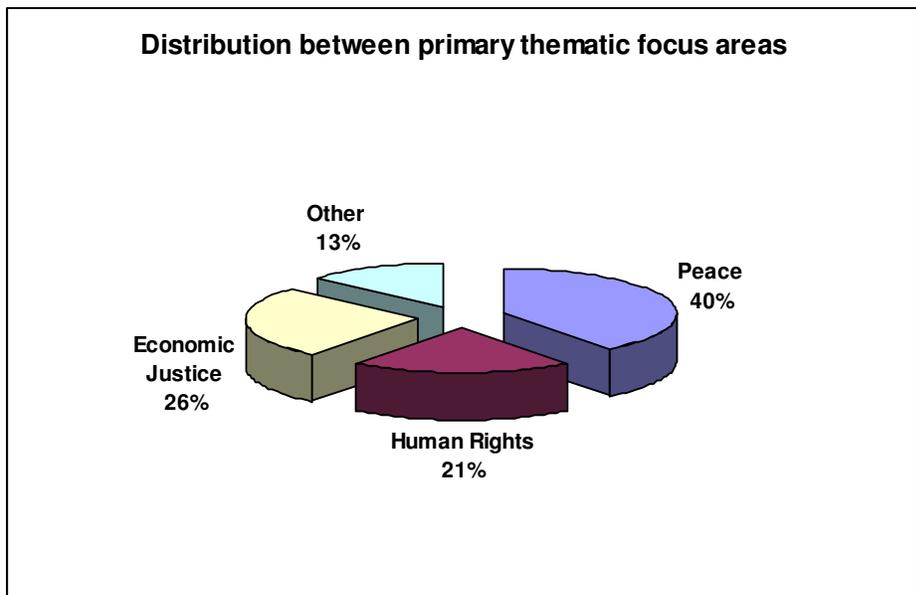
| Task | Number (and percentage) who worked on this | Comment |
|----------------------|--|--|
| <i>Around Europe</i> | 24 (75%) | <i>Around Europe</i> appears to have been a shared task during many years, thus ensuring that a large number of Programme Assistants had the opportunity to develop desk top publishing skills. |
| Study Tour | 24 (75%) | Until 2003 (inclusive) QCEA offered two study tours - one aimed specifically at younger people. This gave an opportunity for most Programme Assistants to gain experience in event organising; since 2004 there has been only one such tour each year. |

| Task | Number (and percentage) who worked on this | Comment |
|-----------------|--|--|
| QCEA Conference | 15 (47%) | A QCEA conference takes place every two years, so a smaller number of Programme Assistants are involved with this. Nonetheless, almost half of those who responded had some input into organising one of these events. |
| EMEYF | 14 (44%) | QCEA has been providing the secretariat for the European and Middle East Young Friends for a long time. Nearly half of those responding to the survey had involvement with this aspect of the work. |
| Website | 10 (31%) | The website is a more recent addition to the work of QCEA and thus a slightly smaller proportion of those responding had experience of this. |

Key focus areas and publications

Asked about the main focus of their thematic work at QCEA, 2 of the 30 who responded to the survey said that they did not really have a thematic focus. In one case the explanation given was that the person was a ‘junior’ Programme Assistant who was doing his gap year; in the other case, this was a matter of regret.

Asked about the secondary focus of their thematic work at QCEA, 11 (or just over 33%) said they did not have such a secondary focus.



It is difficult to analyse the answers about thematic focus areas in any detail because they are so varied. However, it is possible to allocate them to the 3 main thematic areas QCEA has worked on traditionally: Peace, Human Rights, and Economic Justice. Some of them do not fit neatly into just one of them and so

we have counted them in all relevant categories; some do not fit into any of them neatly, so we have counted them under ‘other’. The graph shows the resulting distribution.

20 of those responding indicated that they had worked on a publication (report) during their time which was published either individually or in collaboration with others. That represents just under two thirds of those responding. In other words, one of the key contributions of Programme Assistants over the 30 years has been to research and produce reports on thematic issues for QCEA and thus develop the range of advocacy messages QCEA has then used. With the benefit of hindsight, some of those reports and publications have not been used enough; during the course of

2009, we have begun to review this work thematically and to extract advocacy messages which are still relevant and which could be used in our day-to-day work even now. As a result, we have also begun to make these papers (in so far as they had only been available on paper) available in electronic (scanned) format. This is one way to ensure that the work that went into these continues to have an impact.

What was important? What was good?

We asked about a number of different aspects of the role/experience of being a Programme Assistant at QCEA to find out how important these aspects have been.

We asked those responding to our questionnaire to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 the importance they put on the following aspects of their experience with QCEA. Given alongside the average rating is the number of those responding who rated each aspect at 6 or above:

| Aspect of Experience | Rating - Importance ¹ | Rated at 6 or above by |
|--|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| • Experiencing European Institutions | 8.50 | 27 |
| • Learning new skills | 7.94 | 24 |
| • Living in a foreign country | 7.20 | 23 |
| • Living in Brussels | 7.30 | 22 |
| • Meeting people in Brussels generally | 6.66 | 22 |
| • Working in a Quaker organisation | 7.48 | 21 |
| • Meeting Quakers | 7.00 | 20 |
| • Meeting people in NGOs | 6.57 | 19 |
| • Meeting people in the Institutions | 6.37 | 18 |
| • Improving a foreign language | 5.93 | 15 |
| • Learning a new language | 5.00 | 12 |
| • Living in a Quaker community | 5.61 | 10 |

With 32 responses, this indicates clearly that a significant majority of Programme Assistants valued as important the experience of the European Institutions, learning new skills, living in a foreign country and particularly living in Brussels and meeting people here. Both the specifically Quaker related aspects of the experience and the language learning related aspects were rated generally as of lower importance.

Asked to rate the same aspects in terms of how positive they turned out to be, there was some difficulty in making that distinction clearly. Not everyone responded to this question fully. The average rating for how positive the experience was and the numbers of those responding who rated the experience as above 6 in terms of how positive it was, are shown in the table below:

¹ Scale for Importance: 1 not at all important - 10 very important

| Aspect of Experience | Rating - Positive ² | Rated at 6 or above by |
|--|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| • Living in Brussels | 8.19 | 22 |
| • Meeting Quakers | 8.04 | 21 |
| • Learning new skills | 7.62 | 21 |
| • Living in a foreign country | 7.54 | 20 |
| • Experiencing European Institutions | 7.24 | 20 |
| • Working in a Quaker organisation | 6.75 | 20 |
| • Meeting people in NGOs | 6.71 | 18 |
| • Meeting people in Brussels generally | 6.33 | 16 |
| • Living in a Quaker community | 6.61 | 15 |
| • Meeting people in the Institutions | 5.58 | 14 |
| • Improving a foreign language | 6.04 | 12 |
| • Learning a new language | 5.17 | 11 |

It may be fair to say that the importance ascribed to these aspects reflects the hopes and expectations, and the experience in terms of how positive it was, as the reality of how those hopes and expectations were met. The results would suggest that experiencing the European Institutions was not as good in reality as was generally expected and that meeting Quakers fared rather better in reality than had been expected. That may be some comfort to Quakers.

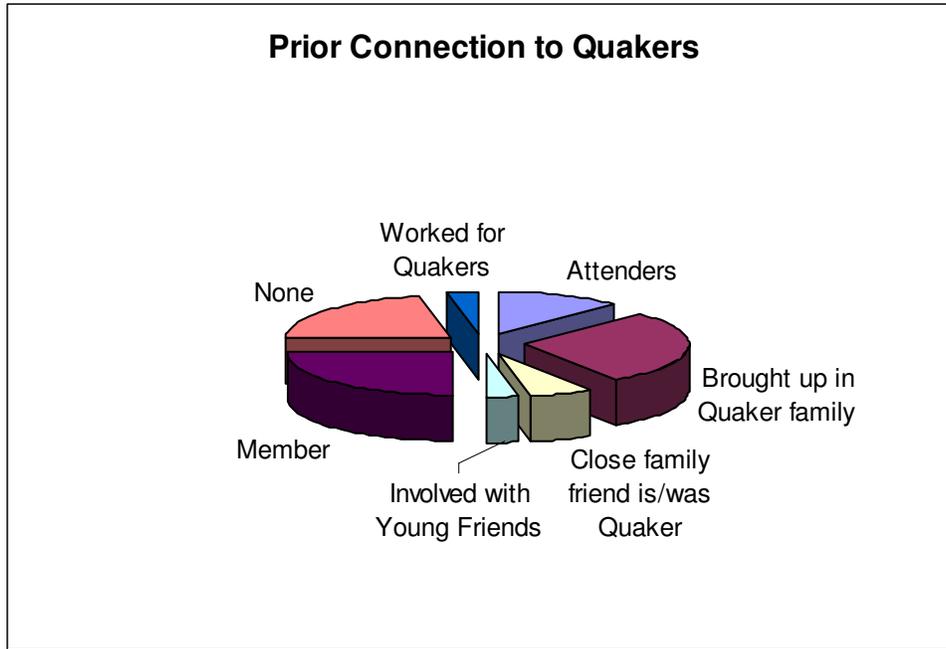
Living in a foreign country and specifically in Brussels, generated high expectations that were generally met. The low rating of foreign language learning both in terms of expectations and in terms of the experience itself, shows that for a predominantly Anglophone group of people, Brussels with its very multilingual environment and its high predominance of English in the Institutions, the NGO community and among Quakers, is probably not the ideal place to further language studies if it is not high on the list of priorities.

Learning new skills generally was second in terms of importance and third in terms of the nature of the experience; QCEA can therefore conclude that it achieves what it sets out to do in terms of providing useful training and work experience.

Connections with Quakers and Quakerism before and after working at QCEA

QCEA has always recruited Programme Assistants from a variety of backgrounds but has always sought to have at least some Programme Assistants who had a prior connection with Quakerism and with Quakers. This connection could be relatively loose or very close or anything in between. We asked those responding to our survey to describe their connection to Quakerism prior to working for QCEA. The graph shows the spread of responses.

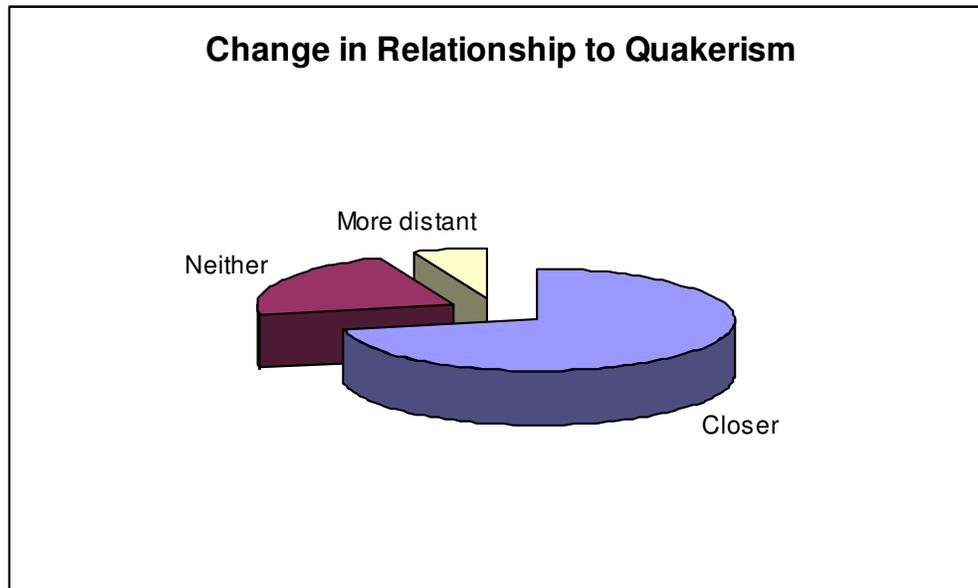
² Scale for Positive: 1 not at all positive - 10 very positive



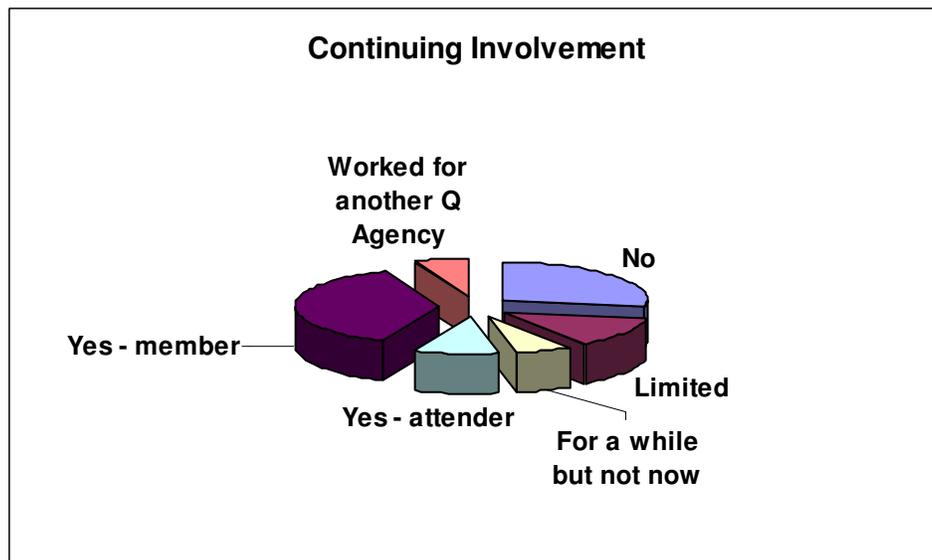
Of those responding, 5 had also graduated from Quaker schools; 2 of those described themselves as Members, 2 as having been brought up in a Quaker family and 1 had no other connection with Quakers. Those grouped as ‘brought up in Quaker family’ include some where the whole family would describe itself as Quaker and those where only one parent is a Quaker or Attender.

QCEA has thus been reasonably successful in attracting a relatively high proportion of young people into Programme Assistant roles who have had some Quaker background in their lives. If attending a Quaker School is counted in as ‘some Quaker background’, then the proportion with such a background among those responding is nearly 85%.

The proportion of those having attended a Quaker school among those responding is 16 per cent. This percentage may not be representative of all former Programme Assistants, and it is lower than our experience over the last 8 years when of 19 Programme Assistants, some 27% had attended Quaker schools.



We also asked those responding to reflect on whether their relationship with Quakers had changed since working at QCEA. The responses are shown in the graph. It should be noted that some of those responding with ‘neither’ stated that they felt very positively about Quakers and Quakerism and that therefore their connection could not really have become closer. On the whole, QCEA has been successful in ensuring that Programme Assistants go away with a positive relationship with Quakers and Quakerism. Given particularly the pressures on all those working for QCEA with intensive work, with the majority of the staff living and working in the same building and with Programme Assistants sharing accommodation (which is not always experienced as a complete blessing) this must rate as a real success.



Does that change in relationship translate into continuing involvement? Sometimes it does, sometimes it does not. The graph above shows the assessment of those responding of their current involvement with Quakers. One fact is evident: where there were 8 of those responding who described themselves as Members at the time they came to QCEA, at the time they responded to the questionnaire, 12 described themselves as Members. Some of those responding went on to work

for other Quaker organisations and a number describe their very close involvement with their local meeting or Yearly Meeting and the work they do there.

We asked about the impact on their view of Quakers and Quakerism the experience at QCEA has had. We asked respondents to rate this on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 was a very negative impact and 10 a very positive one. The lowest rating anyone (2 respondents) gave was 4, suggesting a somewhat negative impact. 5 respondents gave the impact a rating of 5, suggesting that this is neither positive nor negative. Above that level the ratings were distributed as follows:

| Rating | Number giving this rating |
|--------|---------------------------|
| 6 | 2 |
| 7 | 3 |
| 8 | 4 |
| 9 | 6 |
| 10 | 6 |

Not everyone responded to this question. On the basis of the response we did get, the impression of Quakerism gained through working at QCEA has been overall rather more positive than negative. What is interesting and pleasing is that among those who had no prior connection with Quakers, the impact on their view of Quakers scored 8, 9 or 10.

Where do they go from here?

We are often asked what Programme Assistants go on to do once they leave QCEA. So we asked about the current paid work and the career choices. The list of what former Programme Assistants now do is fascinating. It includes:

- Business Manager in IT Industries
- Communications Consultant
- Freelance mediator, trainer and consultant
- Researcher for an MEP
- Consular official in foreign ministry
- Campaigner - green NGO
- Careers consultant
- Chartered certified accountant
- Compliance officer - financial services
- Education advisor
- Trainee - European Commission
- Freelance teacher - business English and part-time office assistant
- Grant giver - US organisation
- Head of Department - Teacher
- Holistic Therapist
- Journalist
- Manager - local government
- Meeting House warden and organiser for local service NGO
- Musician - Singer/Songwriter
- Part-time English Teacher and student
- National Coordinator - AVP UK
- Policy Researcher at faith-based NGO (not Quaker)
- Primary school teacher
- Civilian monitor in conflict areas

- Programme Manager working with small business in South West of England
- Self-employed alternative therapist
- Senior Campaigns Officer - green NGO
- Solicitor
- Trade Unionist
- UNICEF Communications Specialist
- Working with European Commission

Given this wide range of paid work that those responding are doing now (and of course this does not include all the jobs they have done in the intervening years - and for some that has meant some significant changes in direction), it was interesting to find out whether the experience at QCEA was useful in terms of the skills or the experience gained. In response to that question (and sometimes reflecting on a whole range of jobs) the following breakdown of broad answers was given:

| | |
|---|----|
| Not drawn on skills and experience | 5 |
| Yes - but to a limited extent or in jobs other than the current one | 2 |
| Yes | 23 |

Two of those responding did not respond to this question.

Volunteering - a continuing aspect of life?

In the very early days of the life of QCEA, the Programme Assistants were called volunteers; and whilst the role has become different over the years and Programme Assistants are paid a living wage in addition to accommodation in Quaker House being available to them, (in fact, some NGOs in Brussels see the QCEA Programme Assistants as the best paid in town,) we still thought it useful to find out whether those who have served QCEA in this capacity continue to see volunteering as an important part of their lives.

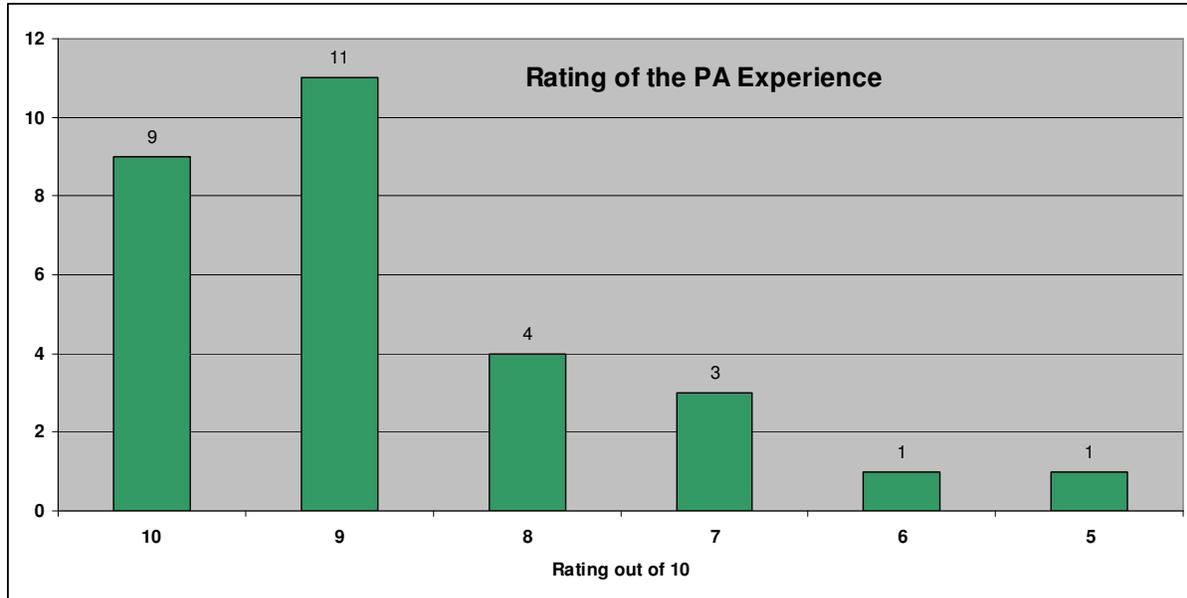
20 of those responding say that they have done or are doing voluntary work of some kind and 16 of those indicate that this is either important or very important to them. For 15 this is linked in some way to their experience at QCEA and 8 indicate that some of their voluntary work is linked to Quakers.

Ongoing contacts

Clearly, the longer the time between the present and the time someone was involved with QCEA, the greater the chance that contacts have been lost. It is therefore interesting to note that of those responding, 23 are still in touch with some or all of the Programme Assistants they worked with and 23 are still in touch - if sporadically - with the Representatives they worked with. How significant these ongoing relationships are varies, as does the frequency of contact. But the fact that the contacts continue - and the relatively high response rate to the questionnaire and to the invitation to the 30th anniversary celebrations- shows that the experience was an important one for many if not all of those responding.

The QCEA experience!

Asked to rate their experience at QCEA overall on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the best and 1 being the worst score), 29 of those responding to the survey did so. The graph below shows the ratings given.



The average rating was 8.74 and shows that overall the experience - with ups and downs - is seen as a good experience by a majority of those responding. It is of course possible that some of those who did not respond did so because their experience was not as good. But even given that, the picture is a positive one. That despite the fact that the comments made in addition to responses to the specific questions are in no way universally uncritical. In fact some of the comments made give some pointers to things that QCEA can do, (and in some respects has done,) to make things generally better.

Finally...

The purpose of doing this survey was to get a feel for the impact QCEA has had on the professional and personal lives of our many Programme Assistants and to reflect the significant impact they have had on QCEA. Without their contribution it would not have been possible to run Study Tours every year (and until 2003 twice a year); it would not have been possible to produce the significant volume of publications and the large portfolio of solid research; it would not have been possible to make some of the key impacts we have made - on issues such as conscientious objection, criminal justice, peacebuilding (including the contribution that QCEA made in the early days to the establishment of the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office) among others. The website would not have been developed and improved several times; *Around Europe*, QCEA's monthly newsletter would not have continued consistently, reaching its 300th edition in March 2008. QCEA would not have been able to maintain the secretariat for the Europe and Middle East Section of Young Friends, a source of Quaker work and Quaker outreach among younger people in many countries. This short paper celebrates all this and more. There is no question that the role of Programme Assistants is a win-win situation for all those involved and for QCEA as an organisation. We recognise this here with gratitude.

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