

## Closing the circle: participant views of a 360 degree feedback programme

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*The use of 360 degree feedback is becoming increasingly commonplace in organisations. It is claimed that this programme offers a more rounded diagnosis of development needs resulting in more effective development plans for individuals and more strategically focused investment in training for the organisation as a whole. These claims are tested in a qualitative and quantitative field study of participants in a 360 degree programme for middle and senior managers at a UK university. Some elements of the programme are found to work better than others, but participants rate their experience of almost all aspects of training and development as significantly better than a matched sample of non-participants, and this leads to more positive global evaluations of the employer. The implications for the use of 360 degree programmes are discussed with regard to the critical HRM literature.*

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**R**ather than relying on the performance feedback from a single, usually senior, source, 360 degree feedback (or multi-source, multi-rater feedback, as it is sometimes referred to) solicits the views of several colleagues at senior, peer and junior levels in the workplace. It is reported that nearly all the Fortune 500 companies are now using 360 degree feedback for development and/or appraisal (London and Smither, 1995) and the number of UK organisations using 360 degree programmes is rapidly increasing (Handy *et al*, 1996; Geake *et al*, 1998; Toolan, 1998). This, if anything, should counsel caution. Brunsson and Olsen (1998) are among many authors who have commented that 'solutions' to organisational problems are often found because they resonate with senior management values and convictions and free the reformers from the need to find the most appropriate remedy, leading to imitation rather than innovation. Caution is also required when reviewers of the field (Fletcher and Baldry, 1999: 163) note that: 'The actual amount of empirical evidence on the impact of 360 degree feedback is disappointingly small considering the extent of its use; widespread adoption seems to have reflected faith rather than proven validity'. Among other items on the research agenda, these authors recommend examining the consequences of these interventions on performance measures, career development activity and attitudes to management. This article explores some of these issues by tracking the responses of middle and senior managers in a university who participated in a 360 degree programme. Before discussing the results of this empirical study, we briefly review three salient literatures: first, those features which characterise 360 degree feedback; secondly, the use of 360 feedback within the context of wider HRM debates; and thirdly, evidence for the performance impact of training and development initiatives.

A number of advantages of 360 degree feedback over traditional assessment have been noted. Much of this is associated with the improved validity of multi-rater over single-rater assessments. Individuals, who typically overrate themselves (Furnham and Stringfellow, 1998) find it hard to ignore similar comments expressed by colleagues and are therefore motivated to address development needs. This is, in part, due to the fact that carrying out self-assessment ratings predisposes individuals to be more accepting of others' views (Riggio and Cole, 1992). Research on ratings in a 360 degree context is generally favourable: for instance, while self-assessment ratings tend to be lenient, they have been found to be reliable measures of behaviour (Nilsen and Campbell, 1993) and to have significant correlation with the ratings of others (Harris and Schaubroeck, 1988). Also, average ratings of subordinates, as against single ratings, have been shown to be more reliable and to have acceptable predictive validity of future performance (McEvoy and Beatty, 1989). Inter-rater reliability and temporal stability of peer ratings have also been found to be valid predictors of performance (Pollack and Pollack, 1996).

For all the improvement in rating validity, care still needs to be exercised to ensure 360 degree questions measure the desired competences and that these correlate with other measures of performance within the organisation (Fletcher *et al*, 1998). Providing this is done, 360 degree feedback, typically based on organisationally derived competencies, can help identify important blindspots for individuals and has the potential for linking everyday behaviours to the strategic intent of the organisation (Boam and Sparrow, 1993). Repeat measures of 360 degree feedback can provide a benchmark for evaluating competency-based training activities (Edwards and Ewen, 1996). Indeed, Hazucha *et al* (1993) found that those managers receiving less favourable feedback ratings invested more effort in development activity than those receiving more favourable feedback first time round, and skill increases as a result of 360 degree feedback. Finally, the process of giving and receiving focused feedback can begin to shift the culture of the organisation to one that is generally more open, honest and concerned about collective performance (IDS, 1995); although, as Fletcher and Baldry (1999) point out, feedback systems may be as much a symptom or expression of change as a factor in its causation.

The current literature is reasonably supportive, then, of 360 degree feedback as a potential aid to individual and organisational development. Indeed, providing measures are taken to avoid bias in feedback, idiosyncratic rating errors and poor reliability/validity of the instrument itself (Fletcher *et al*, 1998), and providing there is sufficient development resource, social support and time made available to the individual (Maurer and Tarulli, 1996), it has been claimed (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998: 43) that 360 degree feedback 'could represent a major organisational transformation towards greater empowerment of staff.' It is with reference to the perceptions of managers experiencing a 360 degree feedback programme that we wish to investigate this claim.

### **The place of 360 degree feedback in the HR debate**

There would appear to be four defining characteristics of the 360 degree approach that differentiate it from most other HR interventions: it is voluntary, confidential, self-determining and learning-oriented, rather than assessment-oriented.

A criticism of HR policies in general, and training initiatives in particular, is that they frequently advertise themselves as increasing discretion, releasing creativity and granting more autonomy to the individual manager when, in fact, the underlying corporate objectives are highly prescriptive (Delbridge and Turnbull, 1992). Here, the language and metaphors used to justify new ways of working constitute a 'new reality' which redefines both the meaning of work and the way in which managers relate to

their employers (Keenoy and Anthony, 1992). Thus, while 'entrepreneurial' and 'customer-focused' competences might be invoked as necessary managerial behaviours to support a change in strategic direction for the organisation, they also can be used as a subtle technique to manipulate the performance, values and attitudes of staff (DuGay *et al*, 1996). On the face of it, there ought to be less grounds for levelling this argument at 360 degree feedback programmes where it is a non-mandatory process and where there are no overt or hidden penalties for choosing not to participate. In practice, it is recognised that these conditions may prevail in a few cases.

A second feature of most 360 degree programmes is that the behavioural feedback produced is usually the property of the individual manager who is at liberty to divulge the outcomes to others at his/her own discretion. This then, distinguishes 360 degree feedback from that used in other situations like appraisals. The notion that the appraisal affords an opportunity for employer and employee to participate in performance discussions which benefit both parties is largely discredited. Such authors argue that this interpretation neglects the unequal power relationship of the two parties as well as the differing subjective experience of appraisal by the appraisee (Newton and Findlay, 1996). Writing about appraisals in universities, Townley (1993: 231) notes, in particular, the way appraisal documents become 'independent texts' and once removed from their original context 'become open to differing interpretations as they are reviewed by those further up the hierarchy'. Some organisations explicitly employ 360 degree data to inform pay and/or performance decisions (Handy *et al*, 1996) and, increasingly the case in the US, as an integral assessment tool for managing performance (London and Smither, 1995). Quite apart from abrogating the principle of confidentiality, Fletcher and Baldry (1999) note that the reliability and consistency of feedback is seriously compromised when the purpose of ratings is evaluative rather than developmental. While it would be naive to suggest that 360 degree programmes are totally unconnected to managerial control systems, they do represent a step forward from the heavily agenda-driven superior/subordinate appraisal discussion.

For some writers, HRM initiatives, by virtue of their increasingly strategic aspirations, are in danger of being locked into a way of thinking which simply reflects the dominance of the organisational imperative (Kamoche, 1994). By striving for integration between organisational and HR strategies, there is a real danger that the different agendas of managers and the managed will be concealed, as traditional forms of coercion which were fairly direct and explicit are replaced by new forms of management control. For instance, it has been argued that despite its promise of emancipation and autonomy, empowerment is another organisational device to professionalise management. As Hopfl (1994: 42) says: 'management development is about motivating and aligning the destiny of the individual to the destiny of the organisation and the notion of empowerment must be regarded in this context.'

This observation that the organisation, or more accurately the senior management team, retain control over the empowerment process is also made by Ezzamel *et al* (1996: 71). In their empirical review of a number of HR practices, they note that: 'the key to empowerment was the development of systems and cultures that would release the creativity and flexibility of employees in a controlled way – that is, in a direction that was predetermined by the designers of the cultures and systems.' Once again, the self-determining nature of 360 degree feedback appears to at least have the potential to be one HR intervention which resists this pattern, allowing individuals to set the agenda and retain control. Individuals can choose to participate in the first place, they can decide which parts of the feedback, if any, to take seriously and they can then

determine their own plan of personal and professional development which may or may not coincide with the wider purposes of their current employer. This is not to suggest that organisations do not have their own managerial agendas for 360 degree programmes, simply that the participant's personal freedom for manoeuvre is far greater than it is with most other HR strategies.

Finally, a tacit rationale for most HR interventions is to bring individual performance under scrutiny. This may not be immediately apparent or understood by the players concerned. Writing about equal opportunity and positive action programmes, for example, Austin and Shapiro (1996: 64) note that: 'the basic premise which underpins these policies is that specific employee groups require some additional training and development to ease their integration into the workforce, or "catch up" with "normal employees". Individuals are expected to suppress their differences and to assimilate into the prevailing organisational culture'. Again, there is no doubt that 360 degree programmes could be used or abused in this manner. The competencies on which the behavioural feedback is based could be imposed rather than derived collaboratively and subsequent training could be thinly disguised as developmental when it is actually remedial; however, such practice would run counter to the spirit of most 360 degree programmes. Again, this is not to deny the inevitable existence of differing agendas of interest groups, usually favouring those exercising most structural, cultural and/or political power in the development process. Burgoyne and Jackson (1997: 61) are among those who acknowledge that the assessment and learning domain is indeed an arena 'within which the conflicting purposes and values within an organisation meet to be reinforced, reconciled or proliferated.' They also maintain that providing important differences are aired and the opportunities for compromise and synergy between different interest groups are not lost, the arena can be managed despite its pluralist nature. The use of 360 degree feedback as a catalyst for self-development would appear to be just such an opportunity.

Although increasing numbers of organisations are adopting this technique, there are surprisingly few reports so far published on the empirical effects of 360 degree programmes, and those that do take a largely uncritical, organisational perspective (eg Chivers and Darling, 1999; Toolan, 1998) or focus on the validity and predictive accuracy of ratings. In this article we seek to remedy this by soliciting the views of those managers participating in a 360 degree programme rather than those sponsoring it. Addressing the possibility of post-hoc rationalisation is more problematic, since any attempt to trace cause and effect in the realm of HR interventions is inevitably coloured by the filtering, embellishing and myth making that attends any organisational change. This should not stop us exploring the effects, however, providing we recognise we are looking for 'plausibility instead of accuracy' (Weick, 1995: 60). The focus of the research reported here is the introduction of a 360 degree programme to middle and senior managers at a UK university. It was felt that this represented a peculiarly challenging environment in which to test the efficacy of such HR intervention. As noted by Wilson (1991: 253) when writing about industrial relations, conflict and control in the university sector: 'a professional academic ethos is not easy to define but contains elements of self-governance or collegiality together with a commitment to disinterested research and teaching; in other words opposed almost in principle to any particular managerial application'.

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## THE STUDY

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The place of the Open University was changed fundamentally by the 1992 Higher Education Act when it was integrated for the first time into an expanded university system. Since that time many of the external demands in the higher education sector have become, if anything, more acute. Among these were: competition for student places and the ever increasing pressure of providing a wide range of high quality courses while remaining cost effective with fast-changing technologies and all the associated opportunities and pitfalls for a high-volume distance learning provider and the need to develop the intellectual property embodied by all categories of staff. With these strategic issues in mind, the university decided to conduct a survey in 1999 in order to monitor staff satisfaction and motivation, provide feedback on initiatives introduced since the 1994 survey and highlight key areas for improvement. As with the first survey, a steering group representing different parts of the university established the basic principles and then commissioned an external agency to design, administer and compute the findings.

One of the initiatives introduced during the intervening period was a 360 degree programme derived from a competency-based questionnaire for senior and middle managers working in academic, academic-related and administrative/technical roles. The stated organisational objectives of the programme were: 'To foster continuous organisational and individual learning as senior managers, to promote positive attitudes to change and to the values of the University and to raise the skill and competence of senior and middle managers to meet the future needs of the Open University'. The individual objectives were: 'To give participants the information to assess themselves against the 12 competencies, to assess the relative importance of each competence in the participant's job, to draft a personal development plan and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the management group as a whole in order to put together a training and development programme'.

Follow-up interviews with those participating in the 360 degree programme highlighted a number of features that were well received, but also some hindrances to the implementation of personal development plans. The staff survey presented a rare opportunity to evaluate some of these issues more comprehensively (see also Rosenthal *et al*, 1997). First, it provided the opportunity to evaluate with some precision the 360 degree programme as a diagnostic and development process; secondly, the opportunity to assess the differential impact of the 360 degree programme on participants in the wider context of their job and organisational membership, which is where the qualitative phase of the study suggested that problems arose; thirdly, and most intriguing, the opportunity to compare these findings between those who had and those who had not participated in the 360 degree programme. This approach afforded the double advantage of soliciting views and outcomes of HR intervention via items embedded in a wide-ranging instrument (thus avoiding the potential bias of post-hoc rationalising), as well as offering conclusions which can be reasonably attributed to an HR programme.

The management competencies on which the 360 degree feedback was based were derived from a series of interviews with opinion leaders located in different jobs and levels of seniority in the university. The initial draft list was then validated by focus groups; these facilitated workshops also provided several examples of positive and negative behavioural anchors for each competency which formed the basis of a 60 item questionnaire, completed by focal managers and nominees on computer disks. Participants in the 360 degree programme had the benefit of receiving a briefing on the strategic role of management training in the context of the organisation's competitive context, detailed feedback from colleagues on a range of internally derived

management competencies, tuition on learning styles and a range of development opportunities, as well as one-to-one assistance with the design and implementation of their personal development plan. According to the literature, all these elements constitute 'best practice' management development. Hence it is hypothesised that those involved in such a process will evaluate their experience of management development more favourably than those not participating in such a programme.

## METHODOLOGY

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At the time of the study 286 middle and senior managers had participated in the 360 degree programme at some point in the previous four years. Of these, 78 (27 per cent) took part in telephone interviews or focus groups within six months, at the most, of preparing their personal development plans. This qualitative stage of the study intended to investigate those aspects of the programme and ensuing management development process which were most helpful or problematic. The second stage of the study used quantitative methods to examine these emergent themes more systematically. Of the total 1,967 salaried staff who returned completed staff surveys, just over 10 per cent (203) had participated in the 360 degree programme. This represented 72 per cent of the total actual number of senior and middle managers who had taken part. Because participants in the programme were self-selected, there was a strong possibility that they might be already more favourably disposed toward their employer than those choosing not to take part. This potential for bias was addressed in two ways.

First, the baseline structural characteristics of the two sub-samples were matched; secondly, the ratings of participants and non-participants were compared on survey items not likely to be influenced by the 360 degree programme. On comparing the two groups, it was found that there was an over representation of academics, professional/technical staff and males in the participants group; this is due to the disproportionate number of managers in these staff categories. Likewise there was a skew towards permanent, full-time staff and towards those with longer tenure. This is because it is relatively unusual for fixed contract and/or part-time staff to be managers; seniority increases the likelihood of becoming a manager; and new staff, even if managers, would have had less opportunity to participate in the 360 programme. In order to obtain a matched pair of samples, the total was weighted such that participant and non-participant samples contained equivalent representation of these different staff categories. The procedure adopted here was rim-weighting. This inflated the non-participant sample, without eliminating any subjects from the data set, until a balance has been achieved on all salient structural variables across both sub-samples. The result was to produce a breakdown as follows: gender (52 per cent male, 48 per cent female), staff category (41 per cent academic, 13 per cent academic related, 41 per cent technical/administrative, five per cent senior secretarial); location (72 per cent central, 26 per cent regional, one per cent other); employment status (96 per cent permanent, seven per cent fixed contract), length of service (three per cent up to three years, 21 per cent three to 10 years, 76 per cent over 10 years) and whether they had been appraised in the previous 12 months (64 per cent yes, 36 per cent no).

A second way of increasing confidence that participation in the 360 degree programme is a causal factor in subsequent behavioural/attitudinal change, was to compare the two sub-samples on items in the staff survey which were unrelated to the aims of the programme. Checking the ratings on a number of such items, it was found that participants usually gave more positive ratings but such differences were slight and generally non-significant.

The primary questions addressed in this study are twofold. How do participants in the 360 degree programme evaluate different elements of this process? How do participants and non-participants compare in their views of training and development processes, outputs and outcomes? The first question was explored via qualitative methods and the second using quantitative analysis.

### **Qualitative analysis**

In order to assess reactions and development outcomes the views of participants in the 360 degree programme were solicited in various ways. It was anticipated that much of the effectiveness of the programme would depend on how successfully managers felt they had been able to transfer their learning into the workplace. Between two to four months after they had completed their personal development plans, telephone interviews were conducted with 53 managers. These semi-structured interviews were designed to find out what had helped and hindered their personal development. Participants were encouraged to provide specific examples or 'critical incidents' of what had worked well or poorly and why. Three focus group discussions were also conducted with an average of eight participants between three and six months after the 360 programme; one researcher asked the group questions (the same questions as asked in the telephone interviews) and another captured their responses. All the responses from both sources were collated retaining verbatim comments and item analysed.

In all, 78 managers (23 at senior grades and 55 middle managers) took part in individual or focus group interviews. Comments on the overall programme were wide ranging; here we report on three themes relating to the 360 feedback and its effects.

**1. Diagnosis** One of the aims of the programme was to help managers become more familiar with their personal strengths and development needs in relation to the organisationally derived competencies. Many expressed the view that they had learnt little that was brand new but the process had served to highlight how to move forward developmentally. Some managers (in faculty and administration) noted, however, that the process might be improved by being more open in contrast to the closed nature of appraisal discussions with one's line manager:

From a faculty perspective of training and staff management, I would find it better if it was not confidential. We would be forced to address issues if the exercise was not private and if there was some answer to the question 'what is the implication if I do or don't do it'.

As a process something based on this would be more helpful than appraisal which is one to one and can reinforce prejudices; 360 degree gives a much wider view which is helpful.

These comments raise an issue which goes to the heart of the 360 degree process. Much of the potential benefit of 360 degree feedback arises from the fact that the managers choose to participate and the feedback 'data' is confidential. As we saw from research findings reviewed earlier, such conditions are likely to enhance receptivity to feedback, increase personal investment in the programme and improve the reliability of the feedback from raters. However, as these managers suggest, the very privacy of the feedback has a cost: it can serve to relieve the line manager of responsibility to support development and it diminishes the possibility of leveraging organisational support, a vital ingredient for the reinforcement of individual efforts to self develop.

**2. Learning transfer and line management support** For 17 per cent of participants, support from their line manager was forthcoming and appreciated. However, when asked about hindrances to personal development, nearly a third referred to lack of support and a similar proportion blamed the absence of progress checks (from their manager and/or the organisation) on the one hand and workload pressures on the other for their lack of progress. The following comment from a course manager was typical:

I told him (my line manager) what I was doing, but he did not think it was necessary. He is supportive in the general sense but was not in support of this exercise. He declined to participate – saw no value.

Despite this many participants reported progress. One of the weaknesses across the management team concerned the ability to handle poor performance and several managers reported making some headway in this area. One finance manager comments:

I now have regular meetings with poor performers and use these to create action lists. I have taken on two colleagues as appraisees, so that I can set targets. Both of these have worked well.

**3. Wider reinforcement** Most group discussions touched on the mismatch between the 360 degree programme and other aspects of the university's personnel policies. For instance, while most welcomed the attention being given to personal development and the attempts to link this to attributes valued by the organisation, there was concern that the competencies on which the 360 degree feedback was based were not reinforced by other university policies. This remark by a student services manager is typical of many:

Competencies and promotion criteria need to match. Grading is in such a mess it is difficult for management staff... especially trying to promote them.

Once again, this raises a potential contradiction in the process: while the purposes are primarily for self-development, participants appear to question the effectiveness of the programme if it remains unconnected from other more formal HR processes like grading, promotion and reward. In short, the benefits of targeted development activity arising from detailed 360 feedback are likely diminish over time if positive reinforcement is not forthcoming institutionally nor from line management.

Overall, the interviews indicated that the 360 degree feedback had served as a catalyst for addressing personal and team issues and that it had stimulated an array of development activities which were much more focused. It was apparent that much of this activity fell into the category of 'opportunistic processes' (Mumford, 1993), with managers taking advantage of everyday events to try out and solicit feedback on new approaches. Equally apparent, were a number of interesting reflections about the programme – concerning the privacy of feedback and how the process fits in the wider context of the organisation's approach to training and development.

The insights from this qualitative stage revealed the way the programme was administered, the perceived degree of support from others in the organisation and views concerning the overall effectiveness of the intervention. These findings also informed the subsequent design of the quantitative instrument.

### **Quantitative analysis**

A systemic approach to training requires some understanding of the inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes of a given set of training and development interventions (Doyle, 1995). Building on previous attempts to establish a theoretical framework for education and training (Pettigrew *et al*, 1988) and management development (Thomson *et al*, 1998; Mabey and Thomson, 2000), the following indices were extracted from the survey.



**Process variables** Whereas the inputs to a training system are largely 'givens', the training processes adopted by an employer indicate the revealing choices, priorities and policy decisions made by the organisation concerning the development of its staff. Here, guided by the literature, respondents were asked about three aspects: appraisals ('appraisals have helped my career development' and 'appraisals give me a clear idea of where I can most benefit from training'); feedback ('I get regular feedback on performance' and 'I get sufficient direction and feedback from the person I report to'); reward and recognition ('I receive recognition for developing my skills'; 'I do not feel the best use is being made of my skills' and 'I have opportunities for promotion').

**Output variables** The outputs of a training system represent the activities resulting from the processes adopted and the ways these have changed the inputs. Of the many possible outputs, two were chosen as of most pertinence to this study: enhanced discretion/understanding ('I have a considerable say in the way my career develops' and 'I understand how I fit in and the contribution I make to achieving my unit's objectives') and opportunities for training ('I have opportunities to train and develop skills'; 'I feel I have been given adequate and relevant training for these extra management responsibilities' and 'the training opportunities available to me are adequate').

**Outcome variables** Whereas outputs measure activities, outcomes represent the qualitative differences that flow from the training intervention. Three outcome measures were used; one addressed training specifically ('how satisfied are you with the quality of the training you have received?'), while the other two were far more global ('compared to other employers, how would you rate the Open University?' and 'how would you rate the effect of these changes on your work?').

In all cases individuals were asked to rate their responses on a four or five point Likert scale and items included reverse scored questions to encourage thoughtful responses. Apart from those questions referring to the 360 degree programme, all other process, output and outcome items were embedded in different parts of the survey. This encompassed a wide range of issues including the Open University's aims, organisational changes, performance feedback, promotion and career development, training opportunities and general assessments of the Open University as an employer.

By creating two matched sub-samples from the overall sample of employees who completed the staff survey in 1999, it is possible to compare their responses to a range of questions concerning training and development. This weighting has the effect of controlling for all the key variables such as staff category, gender, employment status, tenure and so on. Thus we can be fairly confident that the differences, measured by t-test, in Table 1 are attributable to participation in the 360 degree programme, since this is the one variable which differentiates the two groups.

It can be seen that for most of the dimensions of training and development tested, participants in the 360 degree programme register significantly higher scores than those managers who have not been involved in the programme. In three instances, all in the processes area, the difference is in the direction hypothesised but not at a statistically significant level. It could be argued that the catalytic effect of the 360 degree diagnosis and development planning will only be sustained if personal efforts to change behaviour are, at some point, reinforced by other aspects of the HR process such as feedback, appraisals and promotion; hence, if this lack of significant difference compared to non-participants were to persist it might lead to demotivation.

Nevertheless, the fact that participants rate the training outputs consistently higher is evidence that the programme is changing both personal perceptions and organisational practices. For instance, understanding one's contribution to unit objectives is a key aspect of more strategic approaches to HR development and yet a linkage so often found to be lacking in studies of management development (Storey *et al*, 1997).

Likewise, although exercising discretion in developing one's career is generally regarded as desirable doubts have been raised as to whether organisations facilitate this effectively in practice (Stiles *et al*, 1997). On both these dimensions, we appear to have demonstrable evidence that participation in a 360 programme can make a material difference. This difference also extends to more global evaluations as the outcomes' measures show. As to why 360 degree participants should give significantly more favourable ratings to their employer, we can only speculate: perhaps they appreciate the organisational commitment to developing managers, they enjoy the opportunity for careful diagnosis and tailored, more meaningful training or possibly the process has heightened their awareness of the Open University's strategic intent and their part in this. Whatever the reason, the connection between a training intervention and a positive rating of the organisation (an empirically elusive finding) is undeniable.

TABLE 1 *The effects of participating in the 360 degree programme*

Dimension of training and development	Participated in 360 degree programme			t-test
	mean	yes N=203	no N=1670	
<b>Processes</b>				
Appraisals help my career development	2.76	2.92	2.74	-2.18**
Appraisals show where I can benefit from training	2.81	2.92	2.80	1.64 (ns)
Regular feedback on performance*	2.40	2.54	2.39	-2.34**
Sufficient feedback from line manager	3.19	3.25	3.19	-0.84 (ns)
Recognition for developing skills*	2.34	2.54	2.32	3.86**
Best use being made of my skills	3.08	3.19	2.89	3.69**
Opportunities for promotion*	2.35	2.44	2.3	41.41 (ns)
<b>Outputs</b>				
Say in career development	3.28	3.56	3.25	3.99**
Understand my contribution to unit objectives	3.80	4.01	3.78	-3.77**
Adequate training opportunities	3.36	3.57	3.33	3.55**
Received relevant management training	2.67	3.13	2.62	5.02**
Opportunities to train and develop skills*	2.95	3.19	2.93	4.84**
<b>Outcomes</b>				
Satisfaction with quality of training	3.63	3.84	3.61	2.74**
Rating of OU compared to other employers	3.90	4.10	3.88	3.76**
Affect of organisation change(s) on my work	3.12	3.45	3.08	4.70**

\* four point scale

\*\*  $p > .01$

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## CONCLUSION

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We began by describing four essential elements of the 360 degree process: voluntary participation, confidential feedback, self-determination at all stages and an orientation towards learning and self-development as against assessment and organisational scrutiny. We also noted that these elements appeared to overcome the criticism made of other HR policies that they simply reflect the dominance of the organisational imperative and thinly disguise the asymmetrical agendas of managers and managed (Kamoche, 1994). The difficulties associated with attempts to evaluate organisational interventions should not be underestimated. However, by using participant managers as our informants, by adopting both qualitative and quantitative approaches and by utilising an opportunistic sample (the 360 degree programme was incidental rather than the prime focus of enquiry) it was felt that the excesses of post-hoc rationalisation were minimised.

The findings appear to meet at least some of the organisational and individual objectives of the 360 degree programmes. Both the interview and questionnaire data reveals that, while the content of the 360 degree feedback is unsurprising for the majority of managers, it does have the effect of catalysing more focused self-development activities. Many examples were given of managers addressing weaknesses highlighted by the 360 degree questionnaire, making progress in areas of personal development and receiving positive feedback from colleagues as a result. More noteworthy is the finding that participant managers register different aspects of the training and development that they have experienced consistently better than a comparative group of non-participant managers. It can be surmised – though not conclusively – that this more favourable appraisal of development is due to a more accurate diagnosis and enhanced motivation arising. Finally and least expected, this positive experience of management feedback and intervention leads to more favourable assessments of the organisation as a whole. As discussed in the method section, there are reasonable grounds for attributing these effects to participation in the 360 degree programme, rather than a generally favourable predisposition among the participant sub-sample. It should be emphasised that nearly half of the participants were in the 'academic' staff category within a university; although this is not an employment sector not noted for 'managerial application' (Wilson, 1991), we might nevertheless anticipate a greater readiness to engage in reflective learning and development among this sample than commercial managers.

However, when asked about specific aspects of the 360 degree programme, participants were least enamoured when it appeared to mismatch other HR policies and/or their boss was uninvolved. They also expressed a certain amount of ambivalence with regard to the job relevance of the process. This is a possible flaw in the current contextualisation of the 360 degree programme and a signal for organisation's reviewing 360 degree feedback. As with other HR interventions, relevance, recognition and routinisation are important factors in programme success, a point made by Mueller (1996: 773). 'HR policies such as employee training and management development are unlikely to be the basis of the creation of strategic assets, unless they tie into subsequent or contemporaneous skill formation activities, including ongoing operational routines.'

The 360 degree process has a key role to play in creating a 'reservoir' of skills, providing it integrates closely with ongoing skill formation activities. Herein, lies the biggest challenge – to guard the voluntary, confidential and learning dimensions of the 360 degree process, since these are its most valuable features and most likely to lead to the creation of strategic assets difficult for competitors to imitate and also to connect 360 degree feedback and ensuing self-development sufficiently to more formal HR policies, in order to sustain motivation for managers and advantage the organisation.

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