SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

Background

The purpose of this session was to excite people about online approaches to preparing scientific abstracts through virtual mentoring. We know from results of evaluation studies done with delegates at previous conferences that traditional skills-building workshops don’t result in effective transfer of skills to the job, while economic efficiency is fast becoming a constraint on training workshops. Yet, there remains a need for better quality HIV research, and for improving the skills of researchers as writers.

One initiative that overcomes such barriers to learning is the IAS online abstract mentoring prior to conferences. With a simple pedagogic template and free, rapid response by volunteer mentors, the IAS is in a position to:

- leverage technology,
- take a broader vision of learning to include problem-solving, collaboration, apprenticeship of a crucial scientific literacy practice online for professional development, and
- induct early career research professionals into a learning community around IAS and AIDS Conferences.

At IAS 2009, this session brought together existing and new abstract mentors, reviewers, and researchers, to begin the process of creating a mentors' network that will improve the quality of HIV research, especially from developing countries and early career researchers.

We presented an overview of and the results from this year's successful Abstract Mentor Programme - the presentation can be downloaded here.

After the presentation, participants broke into two groups to address two key questions on improving online mentoring. We wanted to gather practical ideas on ‘how-to’ sustainably build an online community to improve scientific writing, step by step. We also wished to gauge how much time and energy mentors would commit to shaping a community for free.
and open-source HIV research capacity building in developing countries through e-learning around conferences.

Answers were recorded on flip-charts and a synthesis is presented in the Appendix attached.

Both groups also agreed that:

1. Mentors could help each other to improve and evaluate the mentoring quality mentoring provided, thus improving the collective understanding of online mentoring;
2. Reviewers could be requested to attest that they have not mentored the abstract they reviewed;
3. Mentors should be allowed to ‘opt-in’ the number of abstracts they wish to mentor in each 3-month period, given their existing work commitments.
4. The mentors’ network should stay small as a pilot project to be assessed after AIDS 2010.

Summary

Participants agreed that setting up a mentor’s network would raise their contribution and importance as researchers in shaping the future of this increasingly global interconnected society to improve the response to HIV/AIDS. By looking at the IAS Abstract Mentor Programme, we will be able to learn some general lessons applicable for systems change in conducting science, writing it up, and disseminating it. This would create a virtuous cycle in developing the essential skills and knowledge to do science. With success, IAS could attract more stakeholders in improving teaching and learning online, thereby widening access and participation in international HIV/AIDS debates.

The IAS Abstract Mentor Programme Team would like to thank the mentors and participants who took part in this first Mentors meeting. The nice thing about teamwork is that you always have others on your side. With such efforts, we know that we are on the right track in deepening our engagement with IAS members – Stronger Together!

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Professional Development & Conference Programmes
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