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Developing academics' multi-disciplinary research and publication skills

What problem was addressed?

Health professional academics often focus on teaching with little time and confidence in undertaking research and writing peer reviewed publications. Despite being interdisciplinary with commitment to multidisciplinary education, our faculty has limited opportunities for academics to develop research and publication skills. Increasing high quality research publications is an objective linked to the Research Excellence Framework assessment (REF2021), the United Kingdom's system for assessing research quality in higher education institutions. Similar processes are carried out worldwide.

What was tried?

Underpinned by active adult learning theories, we invited academic staff to participate in multi-disciplinary research groups undertaking systematic reviews guided by two experienced academics. A research assistant carried out database searches and co-ordinated team meetings.

Two review topics focused on interdisciplinary education with faculty wide relevance were advertised. However, we eventually undertook three reviews because of high staff interest levels. Applicants were aware their involvement included developing research questions, publication screening, data analysis and publication writing. Anticipating potential time commitments was difficult but staff were aware that both attendance at meetings and working independently were required. Approximately thirty staff members applied but after initial meetings, nineteen staff members continued until the reviews were successfully published. The staff and their disciplines were as follows: nursing (5), midwifery (3), radiography (3), social work (3), physiotherapy (1) and education (1). Three were social scientists. Most had little or no recent experience in academic journal publishing.

What lessons were learnt?

The project exceeded expectations. We published six papers – four described review findings, one offered practice recommendations and one was a review protocol. The first authors of four publications were staff with little publication experience. Staff reported that the scheme both increased their research skills and enhanced their teaching.

There were many unanticipated positive outcomes. Review meetings were very enjoyable with lively interdisciplinary debates. Participants clearly appreciated these discussions but emphasised that busy teaching timetables meant it was essential that elements of the review processes could be undertaken individually allowing them to undertake, for example, publication screening, at their own pace. The scheme also led to cross faculty working with staff supporting others' teaching by providing their subject expertise to other disciplines.

Despite the time commitment, several staff undertook a second review and three have since applied to undertake PhDs, citing the scheme as having given them the interest and confidence to do so – adding evidence of their perceived value of the process. Three additional research publications also arose from staff continuing to collaborate after the reviews.

Nevertheless, there were challenges. We consistently underestimated each review's duration and amount of staff time needed. This was primarily because of the unexpected length of time needed for groups to develop research questions but as this was an essential aspect of staff for developing their research skills, it was not rushed. Busy teaching commitments made organising meetings challenging, further increasing the duration of the reviews but overall, we regard the process as a very successful means of supporting in developing staff multi-disciplinary research and publication skills.