

Study to examine students' and staff supervisors' research knowledge and experiences of research teaching within the IPL programmes

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Background

The changing needs of health and social care services demand practitioners who can not only access but analyse sources of evidence for practice. Traditionally students undertook a piece of research as part of an honours degree. However, following changes within research governance (DoH, 2001) CCCU, like most other HEIs, significantly reduced the opportunity for undergraduate BSc interprofessional learning (IPL) students to complete an empirical study. At CCCU, most pre-registration undergraduates in Health and Social Care complete a literature critique in Year 3. Currently only those Radiography students researching radiation doses using phantom models and not using NHS facilities can complete empirical research.

There is little evidence in the literature regarding the teaching of research to IPL students and little is known about the research knowledge of students on completion of undergraduate programmes. Anecdotal evidence of students entering the MSc programme suggests that few have any experience of research knowledge or skills leading to a need to increase taught input. Those that have completed a study have usually only used one research methodology. Similarly, the impression gained from colleagues is that staff acting as supervisors had limited experience of different methodologies.

This study clarified the research knowledge of students entering the MSc programmes and identified their needs. The study also explored the research training needs of staff within the Department to enable a tailored staff development programme to be developed and inform curriculum planning. The aims of the study were to:

- determine the level of research knowledge and skills in MSc students in the IPL programme
- identify the specific training needs for supervising staff.

Approach/methodology

A mixed case study methodology was used (Bowling, 1997, Gomm et al, 2000) and involved several stages.

Stage 1: The students in the IPL MSc Programme were identified on entry to the programme and their knowledge regarding research was evaluated using a questionnaire.

Stage 2: All students in the Research Proposal Module in one MSc cohort were identified and their knowledge regarding research evaluated using a questionnaire. Volunteers were invited to a focus group to discuss their perceptions regarding research and their supervision needs.

Stage 3: Data from a recent audit of staff research knowledge was used to develop a questionnaire to assess Faculty staff knowledge and research experience, and volunteers participated in individual interviews to discuss their perceptions regarding research supervision and their training needs.

Outcomes

A total of 14 different disciplines were involved in the sample of 51 students. MSc students entering the programme had somewhat limited research knowledge and skills. The performance of peers at the proposal writing stage was not significantly different, so little research knowledge had been gained throughout the programme; there are no research specific modules until the proposal stage.

There were 10 different disciplines represented in the staff sample. Despite the belief that staff had a limited range of research skills, most staff had several research skills although few described themselves as highly skilled. However, whereas 80% were confident in supervising undergraduate studies, only 44% of them were confident in supervising MSc studies. There was a limited range of methods and variance in staff confidence in these with 26% having skills in using interview methods whereas only 7% had skills in random controlled trials. Interview key themes were elicited from the data and coalesced around: the process of supervision, academic development of students, programme development issues and staff development issues.

The study identified where support was needed. There was general agreement that programmes within the Faculty should be developed further to incorporate research within them. The hope was expressed that the new curriculum for undergraduates may go some way toward achieving this.

The academic development of students, enabling them to blossom and achieve their potential, was seen as a very rewarding aspect of supervision; all participants enjoyed the experience and gained a great deal of intellectual satisfaction from it.

Most participants thought that there was a need for the development of all staff in research methods and they would welcome more research supervisor training and training in a broad range of specific methods. There was general agreement around the anticipated benefits of extra workshop and seminar activities to supplement those offered in the Graduate School.

Enhancing RIT

Student needs were clearly identified and areas where greater focus was needed, informing curriculum developments. The necessity to have a structured process for supervision was identified as being paramount, as was the need to set ground rules for the basis of a good working relationship.

Advice for others

Beware of programme planning that impacts on your plans for your study. Build in more time for Ethics review. A member of the Ethics Committee commented "Your questions testing staff research knowledge are likely to put them off completing it. I wouldn't ask them anything too difficult if I was you".

Reflections and any future plans

Although the project is complete the work is ongoing. The seminar series will be evaluated and the questionnaires developed for the study will be able to be repeated as an audit tool.

There were changes in the planned project due to significant changes to the planned curriculum for undergraduate study that caused initial delays and eventual significant adjustment to the project. Ethical review took longer than anticipated and the planned questionnaires were scaled down to maximise responses although this limited the scope of the study.

Quote from a staff member "The idea of a Research Summer School is great but not in the Summer. This is our busiest time and by August most of us are too exhausted!"

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