Fostering a research culture: An action research approach to a research day

Dr Dee Drew – Senior Lecturer, School of Health and Wellbeing, University of Wolverhampton

Dr Hilary Paniagua – Senior Lecturer, School of Health and Wellbeing, University of Wolverhampton

Sophie Orton- Research Assistant, Centre for Health and Social Care Improvement, University of Wolverhampton

Jill Evans- Research Assistant, Centre for Health and Social Care Improvement, University of Wolverhampton

Dr Mahua Das- Post Doctoral Fellow, Centre for Health and Social Care Improvement, University of Wolverhampton

Dr Samhita Das, Post Doctoral Fellow, Centre for Health and Social Care Improvement, University of Wolverhampton

Natalie Tyldesley- Research Assistant, Centre for Health and Social Care Improvement, University of Wolverhampton

Abstract

Health care educators can be considered to occupy an important role in the UK governments’ drive to develop a robust evidence-based health care service. This paper outlines a research initiative launched at the School of Health and Wellbeing’s research day, aiming to investigate the views of academics within the school using a survey methodology, whilst providing lecturers with live research experience. Academics gained experience in taking the research proposal through an ethics committee, designing survey questions, analysing data and later publishing the research as an academic paper. Findings from the survey indicated that 58.33% of the sample were not currently engaged in a research project, with commonly cited barriers being lack of time and workload allocation issues. The day itself was evaluated extremely well, however subsequent analysis and writing workshops were disappointing in terms of attendance. This is perhaps unsurprising given previous literature highlighting the struggle of staff in higher education institutions to balance research with other competing demands.

Key words: Staff Development day, action research,

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Introduction

At the heart of the UK governments’ drive to deliver quality health care is a major policy drive to develop a robust evidence-based health service. The vision for all health care practitioners therefore, should be to strive for such evidence and actively participate in research. Ultimately health care educators occupy an important role in any attempt to promote a climate where the culture of undertaking research becomes the expected norm. The need to take a lead in this research agenda is also key to providing students with the essential skills and knowledge to shape their research, as well as to demonstrate the research credibility needed to motivate and enthuse them.

The readiness of lecturers to embrace research initiatives however, has been slow to develop. Traditionally lecturers take up their education role from a practice career and then build up their research activities later on (Girot 2010). Wrestling a workload between the demands of teaching and undertaking research can be a challenge which may result in a divide between those who want to teach and those who wish to concentrate solely on undertaking research. If a positive research-based culture is to be achieved, then there is a need to stimulate and involve individuals in a way in which they will be most motivated, particularly through individualised activities that stimulate real life tasks and experience.

This paper outlines a research initiative launched at the School of Health and Wellbeing’s research day 10th June 2010. This venture focused on a twofold agenda, providing a method by which lecturers experience live research from its inception to fruition, and at the same time investigating the attitudes and state of readiness of lectures to promote a positive attitude to research and adopt a research career.

Background

Projects that encourage educationalists to embrace a research agenda in their departments have already been tried, with varying levels of success. Initiatives such as June, Skuse and Koirala’s (2009) piece of action research to develop an ‘evaluation culture’, essentially a ‘research culture, in a social organisation in Nepal was one such attempt. One of the lessons learnt from the project was that to bring this about, staff had to understand why it was useful: if the staff did not know the benefits it would bring and why it would be an improvement upon the status quo, they would not expend the time and effort when they believed the current system to be adequate.

Likewise, Pratt, Margaritis and Coy (2010) examined a university which was successful in developing a culture of research in a School of Management Studies, where there previously had been none. Though they found there to be numerous factors which facilitated high quality research and an increased level of research output, they determined a research culture was “key to the development of research capability”.
There being a much stronger link between behaviour and beliefs about ‘situational contingencies and motivational factors’ than attitudes and behaviours, Pratt, Margaritis and Coy (2010) argue that in order to foster and instil a new culture of research, a whole set of beliefs had to be changed. In their case study, it was important for the organisation to change its staff’s beliefs about: the organisation’s environment – which was now more competitive due to deregulation of educational establishments; acceptable levels of performance – measures of success were changed from numbers of undergraduate students to post-graduate students, publications and research contracts; the organisation itself – being able to compete against similar organisations; work behaviour - that research was a necessary part of the job, that they were capable of it, that it was important in being hired, retained and promoted and they would be given support to complete it.

In addition, the tension between the demands of teaching and undertaking research can be a challenge, which may result in a divide between those who want to teach and those who wish to concentrate solely on undertaking research. From their phenomenological interviews with academics, Robertson and Bond (2001) highlight that there is a spectrum of opinions among the academics they interviewed: from perceiving research and teaching to have a highly connected and symbiotic relationship, to perceiving the two as mutually incompatible. Furthermore, regardless of their position on this, all academics interviewed felt a tension between spending sufficient time on both activities; time spent on teaching meant time not spent on research and vice versa.

Given the diversity of issues and opinions regarding the involvement and attitudes of educationalists in adopting a research career or agenda, the project devised for the research day aimed to investigate the views of academics within Wolverhampton University and specifically within the School of Health and Well Being. Engaging them as a partner in designing at the same time as partaking in this research, it was hoped staff that would learn more about the research process and also perceive research as a more attainable, realistic, worthwhile and attractive endeavour.

The running of the day

The initiative itself had two aims, first to actually undertake a piece of research and secondly to involve academics, as far as possible, in the essential tasks required of a principal investigator when thinking about designing and undertaking research. This included taking the research project through a real ethics committee, designing the actual questions to be included in the survey, analysing the data and later publishing the research as an academic paper.

An research proposal was devised in order to film its ethical scrutiny by the Schools Ethics Committee, the footage of which would be later shown to those attending the research day at the start of the event. The proposal was deliberately designed with some of the ethical dilemmas the committee can face, and the task was to raise challenging discussions that
would stimulate audience debate as well as approve the ‘real’ action research itself. The audience attending were given copies ahead of time in order to evaluate it before seeing the film, in order to form their own views. A member of staff volunteered to act as the principal investigator, taking it in vivo to the ethics committee,

The questions for the survey were designed to not only gather relevant answers needed for the actual research but with some questions that were unethical and deliberately flawed in order to engage the audience in further debate about questionnaire design. The questionnaire was created using “Surveyor” and the audience participated in developing the items using “Turning Point” - a software allowing people to answer surveys in ‘real-time’. Once the questions were finalised (see Appendix 1) the research team illustrated to the audience how to load them on to Surveyor and finished the survey ready for it to go out live to the rest of the School later on.

Workshops and presentations were given on every step of the research process – design, ethics, developing the questionnaire, results and analysis – and on why research is important to service development. Process was blended with the personal as researchers described procedures as well as their experience of the process. At the end of the day the audience were invited to sign up for workshops on analysing the data and others on experiencing writing the research in an academic paper.

Carrying out the survey

A purposive sample of School of Health and Wellbeing staff was recruited, using the email distribution list. Purposive sampling was deemed the most appropriate to ensure participants had enough experiences and abilities to respond to the survey items (Parahoo 2006, Neuman 2003).

Email addresses were obtained in order to send the questionnaire out online to all appropriate academic staff. The research assistants from the School facilitated this process. An email was attached to Surveyor to inform the staff of the purpose of the research.

Data Analysis

Closed questions were analysed to produce descriptive statistics. Free response items were explored using a thematic analysis approach.

Findings report

Characteristics of participants

Forty-nine members of staff from the School of Health and Wellbeing, University of Wolverhampton, participated in the survey. Participants were from a wide range of departments and roles within the school, however the predominant groups were from adult nursing (23.64%) and community health (12.73%).
58.33% of the sample stated that they were not currently engaged in a research project, with only 22.92% and 18.75% either currently conducting or part of a team who were conducting research respectively. 79.17% stated that they had received formal training in the research process, with 16.67% stating they had not, and 4.17% stating that they had not but would like to. The predominant source of formal training was during a course/workshop aimed at supervising research students (20.51%), or through their previous studies (26.92%).

Barriers to engaging in research
The most commonly cited barrier to engagement in the research process by this sample was the lack of time (24.17%), followed by workload allocation issues (21.53%) (Figure 2).

No participant stated that their line manager would not allow them to engage in research, and only 2.08% stated that they did not feel it was part of their role.

The majority of respondents (56.25%) had not received any level of formal training in applying for research funding which may be essential to a research project. A further 29.17% stated that they had not received formal training but would like to. In the same context of training on research process that each staff reportedly received varied from basic research modules as part of their academic courses such as BA, MA and PhD, study days, training events and experience gained while working on various research projects.
Qualitative analysis explored these issues further (Figure 3), indicating the reasons for being currently involved in research as stated by the respondents were income generation for the school and the university, interest in evidence based practice, interest in the subject to build up a research portfolio, role development and personnel interest motivated them to be a part of a research. However, there was also a perception amongst the academic staff that a lack of support, encouragement, motivation along with inter/intra-department relations (relationship between colleagues) deterred them from getting involved in research.

![Figure 3. Barriers to engaging research](image)

**Facilitators to engaging in research**

As can be seen in Figure 4 the perceived facilitators to engaging in the research process were more varied, with a wider range of responses. The most commonly cited facilitators were interest (10.92%) and personal development (10.56%), closely followed by support from colleagues (9.51%) and protected time or SMRSA (9.86%).

![Figure 4. Facilitators to engaging in the research process](image)

Sixty-nine percent of the sample agreed that research underpinned their teaching practice, and 63.64% agreed that their line manager would allow them to do research if they requested, indicating not only the importance of engaging in the research process, but also the creation of opportunities to do so within the school of health and wellbeing.

These findings were supported in the qualitative analysis. The question on the facilitators to engaging in research brought out the scope of further research and policy emphasis. It highlighted the role of line managers, support from colleagues, protected time (SMRSA), personal development and personal interest. Better time management and efficient work load allocation with effective use of SMRSA was emphasised.
Incorporation of research into the undergraduate programme and nurturing a supportive infrastructure were also stated as possible agents that would facilitate involvement amongst the academic staff of SHAW. While there was a considerable number of respondents who commented that research would largely underpin their teaching practice, there was also an expectation that if line managers and other colleagues reacted positively and supportively, staff might be more encouraged to involve themselves with research.

Interestingly, the question on a potential research proposal attracted a range of ideas, namely midwifery practice based, health care, gender roles, evidence based practice, student experience, ethical issues, practice nursing, clinical practice, child abuse, domestic violence, emotion work as applied to teaching, smoking related research, mixed method approach, impact of talking therapies, NHS line managers awareness of APL opportunities and process, primary care, professional practice, community health, supporting students with additional learning needs, forms of support for social workers and social care staff, assignment feedback, qualitative education and attrition issues.

Figure 5. Facilitators to engaging in research

Conclusion

The scale of the challenge in undertaking this day, as well as engaging the entire School in research of some sort, cannot be underestimated. The day itself evaluated extremely well and seemed to be successful, with no one feeding back any negative comments. The data analysis and writing workshops were disappointing in terms of attendance. However, this should be of little surprise given the evidence in the literature that staff in higher education institutions struggle to balance engagement in research with all their other competing demands (Green et al 2006, Segrott et al 2006, McCance et al 2007). The findings support much that has already been identified in the literature and confirms the School of Health and Well Being’s position within this. They also highlight future responsibilities and challenges that have to be faced in changing research culture and the need to bridge the divide between teaching and research, and the importance of valuing both. As a method of engaging lecturers collaboratively in the research process, this strategy illustrates an effective model that provides a step forward when attempting to inspire, educate and support educators along the path of adopting a research culture.
References


Appendix 1

1. Do you agree to take part in this survey?

2. Please choose the option which best describes your team or is the main component of your role:
   a. Administration
   b. Adult nursing
   c. Child branch
   d. Community health
   e. Cross-school roles e.g. multimedia, student support
   f. Health studies
   g. Learning disabilities
   h. Mental health
   i. Midwifery
   j. Nursing
   k. Other (please define below)
   l. Research
   m. Social care
   n. Social work

3. Please choose the option which best describes your highest level of education reached
   a. GCSE/ O Level
   b. A Level or equivalent
   c. Diploma
   d. PhD
   e. Postgraduate degree or equivalent (Masters level)
   f. Professional doctorate
   g. Undergraduate degree or equivalent

4. If you are currently undertaking a qualification but have not yet completed it, please choose the option which best describes your studies
   a. GCSE/ O Level
   b. A Level or equivalent
   c. Diploma
   d. PhD
   e. Postgraduate degree or equivalent (Masters level)
   f. Professional doctorate
   g. Undergraduate degree or equivalent

5. Age group:
   a. 18-24
   b. 25-34
   c. 35-44
   d. 45-54
   e. 55-64

6. Gender
   a. Male
   b. Female

7. Ethnicity:
   a. British
   b. Irish
   c. Other white
   d. White and Black Caribbean
   e. White and Black African
   f. White and Asian
   g. Other mixed
   h. Indian
   i. Pakistani
   j. Bangladeshi
   k. Other Asian
   l. Black Caribbean
   m. Black African
   n. Other Black
   o. Chinese
   p. I do not wish to disclose my ethnic group

8. Are you currently conducting a research project?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. I am not currently conducting a research project but I am part of a team who are conducting one

9. What are your reasons for being currently involved in research?/Why are you not currently involved in research? (free text, dependent on previous answer)
10. Who would you first speak to if you wanted to conduct some research?

   a. A colleague  
   b. A friend  
   c. Your line manager  
   d. A researcher/someone involved in research  
   e. Don’t know  
   f. Other (please define below)

11. Who do you think you should speak to first if you wanted to do some research?

   a. A colleague  
   b. A friend  
   c. Your line manager  
   d. A researcher/someone involved in research  
   e. Don’t know  
   f. Other (please define below)

12. Have you had any formal training on the research process?

   a. Yes  
   b. No  
   c. No, but I would like to

13. What training have you had on the research process? (tick all that apply)

   a. Course/workshop aimed at supervising research students  
   b. Course/workshop aimed at teaching research  
   c. Course/workshop aimed at research beginners  
   d. Course/workshop about starting a PhD/Masters  
   e. Course/workshop about conducting commissioned research  
   f. Course/workshop about evidence based practice  
   g. UKRO briefing day  
   h. Previous studies (please give details below)  
   i. Other (please define below)

14. Have you had any formal training on applying for research funding?

   a. Yes  
   b. No  
   c. No, but I would like to

15. What training have you had on research funding?

   a. Introduction to funding from the UK research councils and major charities  
   b. FEC workshop  
   c. Support for applying for external research funding  
   d. Introduction to EU funding – the basics  
   e. How to win research grants  
   f. Searching for funding (researchresearch.com)  
   g. FP7 funding opportunities workshop  
   h. Previous studies (please give details below)  
   i. Other (please define below)

16. If you were to write a research proposal, what would your chosen topic/subject be and why?

17. What do you see as barriers to you personally engaging in the research process? (you may tick as many as you wish)

   a. Lack of opportunity  
   b. Fear of failure  
   c. Lack of funding  
   d. Not interested in research  
   e. Lack of resources  
   f. My line manager would not allow it  
   g. Deciding on a topic  
   h. Don’t know how to go about it  
   i. Lack of time  
   j. Lack of support  
   k. No link between research and my own practice  
   l. I don’t need to  
   m. I don’t feel that it is part of my job role  
   n. Workload allocation issues  
   o. Other (please define below)
18. What do you see as facilitators to you personally engaging in the research process?

a. It’s interesting  
b. Support from line manager  
c. Access to funding  
d. Help from staff development programmes  
e. I have a specific topic I am interested in  
f. Favourable outcomes  
g. I can gain a qualification in the process  
h. Support from colleagues  
i. Access to resources  
j. Having the knowledge/confidence  
k. Protected time (SMRSA)  
l. Personal development  
m. Development of the university  
n. Other (please define below)

19. To what extent do you think that research underpins your practice? (7-point likert scale)

20. My line manager would allow me to do research if I wanted to (7-point likert scale)