Building Capacity for Social Care Research

(Enablers and barriers facing HEI academic staff in Wessex)

Executive Summary
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Study overview

- This summary describes the findings of a study funded by the Clinical Research Network (CRN) Wessex to develop a better understanding of the challenges of building capacity to undertake social care research in the Wessex region (Dorset, South Wiltshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight) and the opportunities for building research engagement and capacity.

- Participants for this report were Higher Education Institute (HEI) academic staff working within the Wessex region.

- Data was collected between February and September 2022.

- All participants (*n=9*) completed an online questionnaire.

- A subsample (*n=5*) were interviewed to collect positive and negative views of their experiences to date of research and of supporting external research projects and staff in the course of their job.

- Two reports were produced for the overall study.

- The second report, which this summary covers, focused on the enablers and barriers facing HEI academic staff in Wessex from the perspective of current academic staff who worked in HEIs and who regularly interacted with the social care sector.

Findings

From an HEI perspective, barriers are hindering the enablers in effectively building social care research capacity within Wessex.

Data paints a picture of HEI academic staff who might be positive towards research facing many hurdles in influencing or helping to build research strategy (both internally and externally), advance their research skills and embed their research into practice.

Organisationally, HEIs have been forced to concentrate on their core business of teaching during COVID-19. The drive to move teaching online during this period and the need to substitute face-to-face placements with alternative methods of practice simulation caused many additional pressures to be placed on academic teams. There also seems to have been a noticeable churn in posts, with experienced staff leaving (or in some instances being asked to leave) to be replaced by newer team members. However, some posts have not been replaced due to tougher funding restrictions within HEIs. Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 had also impacted on the ability of research to be effectively carried out, with some projects being suspended and not always being completed at a later date due to the delays.

Against this picture, there is also the continuing addition of administerial and managerial responsibilities onto academic staff, which was happening pre-pandemic (partially due to staff numbers in professional services being cut). This is causing research time to be crunched - notable in the surprisingly small difference between research time allocated within HEIs (12.3%) vs LAs (7.9%) in our sample. Doctoral and Masters qualifications are also more difficult to pursue and obtain unless holidays, weekends and evenings are utilised.

However, research is still being carried out and HEI academic staff are still very research positive, confident and wanting to engage in research, even when set against a difficult funding environment and operational stresses. Unfortunately, the difficulties of the role, including problems with engaging with LAs and service users effectively for support and research projects is perhaps limiting the overall effect that they are able to have on promoting a research positive attitude across and within these groups at the moment.

Across Wessex (and nationally) different small-scale initiatives are being trialled, but they are not joined up. When coupled with the picture emerging from within LAs (see partner report) – where at present, the barriers outweigh the enablers in effectively building social care research capacity within Wessex – this highlights the tough conditions in being able to scale up research capacity within this sector.

In the short term, there are six areas where resources could be focused on helping to improve the current picture.

Recommendations

1. Contact:
    a) Consider the current use of social media by the NIHR (such as Facebook, LinkedIn) to raise awareness of Wessex wide research funding opportunities and scholarships, via direct contact with HEI academic staff (in addition to traditional email pathways), which might provide alternative channels for reaching intended targets.

2. Encouragement:
    a) Consider sponsoring interested research champions within HEIs at all academic and research staff levels to start to build a cohesive collaborative research voice.
    b) Engaging with senior HEI management about the realities of research vs teaching on a day-to-day basis and how they can benefit from a positive research environment and explain why research is <u>not</u> a luxury but an essential component.

3. Support (for LA and HEI link ups):
    a) Consider creating regular opportunities for interested practitioners to meet up with HEI academic staff in an online environment (whether by online meeting, forum, or email questions, which can then be answered in a podcast or other recorded response).
    b) Consider how research co-ordinator posts could be encouraged within LAs to improve research relationships between the two organisations.
    c) HEI Mentors and Supervisors/HEI Research Champions/NIHR Representatives engaging more/interceding with senior LA management on behalf of practitioner applicants to explain tangible benefits of supporting staff members during the application process.

4. Support (for service user and HEI link ups):
    a) Consider creating regular opportunities for interested service users to meet up with HEI academic staff in an online environment (whether by online meeting, forum or email questions, which can then be answered in a podcast or other recorded response).
    b) Consider sponsoring interested research champions within the domiciliary and residential sector and voluntary organisations to start to build a cohesive collaborative research voice.

5. Improvements to academic research training:
    a) Examine ways of providing direct face-to-face (through regional HEIs) or online training around areas of high demand suggested by participants in this study: writing grant applications (*n=9*), documenting people's experiences (*n=7),* career development, research methodologies, service evaluation, service development and needs assessment (all *n=5*).

6. Improvements to practitioner research training:

a) Investigate regional HEI and non-HEI training provision and elements of research included (at Apprenticeship, Foundation, Degree, Masters levels) to see if when mapped they need to be revised or can be expanded.

b) Lobby for more research elements to be included in annual professional registration for social workers and other health care professionals working in the social care sector going forward.

c) Initiate scoping and development of social care research skills modules by HEIs which can be used for basic training, or as a refresher (online or face-to-face).