Successes and challenges of a systematic approach to strengthen PhD programmes in Africa

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In order to improve health in low- and middle-income countries, it is essential to improve the local research capacity.

The Malaria Capacity Development Consortium has funded PhD students and post-doctoral positions to strengthen malaria research capacity in African universities.

The aim of this study was to document the baseline capacity for running high quality doctoral programmes in each of the universities and to track improvement in capacity over 5 years.

We developed a comprehensive benchmark and indicators covering all the policies, processes and facilities needed to run doctoral programmes.

Introduction

A baseline assessment of the four universities’ (Ghana, Malawi, Senegal, Tanzania) capacity for PhD programmes against the benchmark was conducted during on-site visits in 2009.

Progress against recommendations/indicators was carried out in 2012 (on-site visits) and 2014 (phone/skype interviews) with key stakeholders in each institution (i.e. a developmental evaluation approach).

Information was obtained about what progress had been made, what had enabled or hindered this progress, and whether this developmental evaluation approach had been helpful to the universities.

Materials and Methods

All the universities demonstrated some progress in improving their PhD programmes especially in:

• developing PhD Handbooks for doctoral students
• improving IT/Library access
• better student supervision and progress monitoring

Least progress was made in establishing a process for regularly reviewing PhD programmes.

It was also noted that progress slowed down over time possibly because:

• the easiest gaps to address were tackled first and
• there were infrequent internal formal reviews of progress.

Results

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More frequent inputs by the evaluation research team may have helped to accelerate progress.

Conclusions

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In such complex programmes it is likely that some activities will work better than others. Our systematic and evidence-based approach enabled us to demonstrate successes and challenges.

Our findings helped us to understand which doctoral programme improvements are particularly difficult to achieve, and why. This can inform future similar programmes, and guide appropriate targeting of efforts to make programmes more effective.

The process for actively managing research capacity strengthening was effective and was transferable among these diverse universities.

Regular review, possibly in collaboration with external agencies, may help to maintain momentum.

Further Information

Please go to:
http://www.lstmed.ac.uk/research/centres-and-units/capacity-research-unit
http://www.mcddconsortium.org/

Reference


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