



What makes a ‘successful’ collaborative research project between public health practitioners and academics?

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About the research

The Public Health Practitioner Evaluation Scheme (PHPES) is a national, competitive scheme that offers practitioners support to evaluate local interventions in collaboration with NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR) researchers. The scheme was introduced in 2013 but had not been evaluated.

A team of researchers from Sheffield and Fuse was funded by SPHR to evaluate the scheme and make recommendations for the future of PHPES.

The team:

- 1) Conducted a rapid review of applications and reports from PHPES projects (20013-17);
- 2) reviewed eight sampled projects (including unfunded ones), in more detail and interviewed at least one researcher and one practitioner involved in each of these projects;
- 3) conducted an online survey among practitioners, researchers and PHPES panel members, including lay reviewers;
- 4) organised a national workshop with a wide range of PHPES stakeholders, including lay representatives/community members and PHE.

The research was conducted between April and December 2019 and identified three tensions between practitioners and researchers that need to be resolved to maximise the success of collaborative research projects:

- 1) the scope of collaborations;
- 2) local versus national impact; and
- 3) inequality in access to research funding.

Policy implications

The evaluation suggests that the success of collaborative research applications between public health professionals (PHP) and researchers can be improved by:

- Organising regional development workshops to explore feasibility of ideas and clarify expectations (*which reduces inequality in success rates*);
- Providing variable levels of funding to projects at different stages of development, including smaller scoping studies (*to increase scope of collaborations with a focus on transferability of findings from local to national contexts*);
- Dedicating more resources for disseminating findings across the PHP community nationally, as well as to practice partners involved in the projects locally. (*This makes it possible to support both transferability and ongoing relationship building between academics and practitioners*).
- The implementation of these recommendations in the re-launch of PHPES in February 2019 suggest that the scheme has been successful in addressing the three identified tensions between practitioners and researchers.

Contact the researchers

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Key findings

The findings are framed as a “SWOT” analysis of the PHPES:

Strengths: PHPES provides much needed resources for evaluation which often are not available locally and produces useful evidence to understand where a programme is not delivering, which can be used to develop interventions formatively.

Weaknesses: Objectives of PHPES were too narrowly focused on (cost-)effectiveness of interventions, while practitioners also valued implementation studies and process evaluations.

Opportunities: PHPES provided opportunities for novel/promising but less developed ideas. More funded time to develop a protocol and ensure feasibility of the intervention prior to application could increase intervention delivery success rates.

Threats: There can be tensions between researchers and practitioners, for example, on the need to show “success” of the intervention, on use of existing research evidence; importance of generalisability of findings; and of generating peer reviewed publications.

The findings and comparisons with related funding schemes (NIHR PHIRST and HRB APA), demonstrate how these tensions can be addressed successfully by providing practical solutions.

Further information

The findings of the study are published as:

[Van der Graaf P, Blank L, Holding E, Goyder L. What makes a successful collaborative proposal between public health practitioners and researchers? A mixed-methods review of funding applications submitted to a local intervention evaluation scheme. Health Research Policy and Systems.](#)

See also: <https://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/members/review-of-public-health-practice-evaluation-scheme-phpes-2013-17/>

About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

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Priorities for collaborative research identified by PHPs and academics

