

Applying to the European Research Area Network Scheme (ERA-NET): collaborative working for nursing and midwifery research*

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Aim: This paper reports on work undertaken to achieve an application for monies from the European Commission's 6th Framework Programme by some key stakeholders, working with a nursing and midwifery research agenda at national policy levels.

Background: A short outline of the European Commission's European Research Area Network scheme is given in order to set the paper in context, and the vision underpinning the application is discussed.

Conclusion: The paper describes the processes that were undertaken to bring to fruition such collaborative work, and some key lessons are outlined. Seeking opportunities to enhance nursing and midwifery research within a European context gives value to the application, which was ultimately successful.

Keywords: Collaboration, Coordination, ERA-NET, European Commission, Funding Application, Nursing and Midwifery Research

Introduction

A Council of Europe Nursing Research report was published in 1996, which for the first time at such a policy level acknowledged the important role of research for nurses. A key element of the report was the recommendation that member states establish national strategies for the advancement of nursing research. While development had occurred, substantive research remained limited as identified by research leaders when considering how to build a European nursing strategy (Instituto de Salud Carlos III 1999). The final report of this latter conference emphasized the importance of nursing research becoming an integral part of the broader

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health research policy agenda in each country (Instituto de Salud Carlos III 1999). Since that time, there has been continued progress in national nursing research policy and its implementation by individual European countries and regions such as the UK (Rafferty & Traynor 2004a,b), Spain (Jones et al. 2004), Ireland (Condell 2004), Scotland (Dowding & Fyffe 2004; Fyffe & Hanley 2002) and the Netherlands (Advisory Council on Health Research 2001). While this literature shows that the growth of nursing and midwifery research is taking place, each country has their own approach and emphasis within their own phase of development, drawing on their existing strengths and expertise. National progress is therefore variable. At a pan-European level, professional collaboration on nursing research has long been undertaken by the national nursing associations through the Work Group of European Nurse Researchers (WENR) (Perälä & Pelkonen 2004; Smith et al. 2004). Since 1978 WENR has worked to build close contact with nurse and midwife researchers throughout Europe

and to develop more systematic collaboration within the field of nursing and midwifery research in Europe. Building upon the Council of Europe report, WENR continually seeks to influence European health policy and to promote the value of nursing research for the people of Europe (WENR 2001). This work, in the main, has been led by researchers themselves rather than policy-makers. Both these policy and professional approaches have given value to nursing and midwifery research through various activities such as profiling, lobbying and networking.

Collaboration is a concept becoming increasingly familiar to nursing and midwifery. However, there is a risk that collaboration is being advocated as perhaps the panacea to a range of problems and if used inappropriately within research settings is at risk of not achieving the desired outcome (Henneman et al. 1995). The nursing literature has examples of many collaborative research projects (Beattie et al. 1996; Gelling & Chatfield 2001; Girot et al. 2004; Kearney et al. 2000; Rolfe et al. 2004), but this paper describes a unique collaboration of policymakers and funders with the aim of gaining funds from the European Research Area Network (ERA-NET) scheme of the European Commission's 6th Framework Programme. The impetus for this initiative is grounded in the Spanish-led meetings of Salamanca (Thompson 1999) and Madrid (Instituto de Salud Carlos III 2003), an outline of which has been described elsewhere (Hale 2004). In order to describe the collaborative efforts of this project a framework is used. This framework, mooted by Lancaster (1985), has been used previously by Gelling & Chatfield (2001) whereby collaboration is the successful outcome of six Cs: contribution, communication, commitment, consensus, compatibility and credit.

The collaborative context: the ERA-NET scheme

The European Commission (EC) is a body that proposes legislation for the European Parliament and Council, which represent the member states of the European Union. The EC also implements common policies, administers the budget and manages the Union's programmes. The European Union's Sixth Framework Programme is the main instrument for research funding in Europe with a focus on creating a European Research Area. As part of this, the ERA-NET scheme is designed to support coordination and cooperation activities of national and regional programmes of research. These programmes must be funded or managed by national or regional governmental funding agencies or public bodies and implemented at such a level, and be strategically planned. As such, eligible entities for application are national or regional governmental-funding agencies or public bodies. The types of activities envisaged under this scheme include systematic information exchange, identifying and analysing strategic issues, development of joint activities between programmes and implementing transnational research. There are two instruments through which the scheme is operated: a coordination action or a

specific support action, with the latter being the instrument of choice for this particular application. Specific support actions are short-term projects (1 year or less) with the aim of acting as 'starting blocks' for future coordination development.

Political vision and leadership

Before detailing the experience of how the group came together and worked collaboratively, it is worth noting the issue of political vision that this project entailed and which laid the foundation for one of the Cs – commitment. While continuing to build on the previous work outlined in the introduction, there was an inherent vision that providing a research base for nursing and midwifery would make a major contribution to health care in Europe. There was also a belief that success would achieve more than the just monies gained to undertake the project. Success would also mean increased visibility of nursing and midwifery research at the European level, as well as enhanced credibility for such working at national levels. Increasing emphasis is being placed on basing health and healthcare decisions on the best available evidence. While the significance of nursing and midwifery's contribution to the clinical agenda is gradually being acknowledged, this is not matched in terms of its influence on the wider research agenda. As such, there was added value should the funding bid be successful. Where appropriate, national leadership provided extra confidence building in this vision by fully supporting the funding bid and the individuals involved. Such leadership included chief nurses and was critical to success.

Forming the Nurses Working Group (NWG)

The NWG was formed principally by networking, and this was led by Spain, which used its existing network contacts. Opportunities such as chance meetings at conferences and in governmental arenas built on that network. While this initial trawl gave a breadth of nations to the approach, it also brought some disadvantages. The network was primarily professional, which meant that some groups or individuals were simply ineligible to participate under the ERA-NET eligibility clause. This was confirmed in the failure to pass a first-step screening of an initial application to the ERA-NET programme in 2003. The group was advised that any subsequent applications required a greater policy as opposed to professional presence. Here the importance of the ineligible individuals came to the fore. By seeking information and lobbying within their own countries in order to identify and provide contacts to the NWG, their 'behind the scenes' work strengthened the NWG in terms of policy participation, either by individual or by organizational representation on the group. Rafferty & Traynor (2004a) have written elsewhere of the need for an element of convergence between policy and professional drivers. In this instance, the broadening from a uni-professional membership and one still mainly driven by researchers to non-nurses working in R&D policy assisted with setting the application in a broader context.

While not explicitly sought, the individuals who formed the final NWG fortuitously brought different areas of expertise to the application – the second C of collaboration, which is contribution. The partners from the UK and Ireland had experience of processing funding bids. Thus, the knowledge of what a good bid entails was brought to the application. The Dutch partner had experience in communications and lent considerable expertise to developing that angle of the funding bid. The Spanish partner had important links to others who had been successful at this level and had made the initial contacts with officials in Brussels, thus bringing valuable knowledge of the funding body to the application process. Attendance at the earlier Madrid meeting of four of the five individuals involved in the NWG was of assistance in building relationships. This gave the opportunity of some initial knowledge of each other as individuals such as type of sense of humour and likelihood of verbal contribution at meetings – important information when working at a more formal level as a group and the third C of collaborative working – compatibility.

Collaborating for application

The decision was made at the outset to site central coordination of the application with the Spanish partner. This was expedient and was based on the level of human resource and national support for the ERA-NET in Spain, an existing contact with the necessary officials in the EC, and the previously demonstrated leadership in the form of the Salamanca and Madrid meetings.

Working collaboratively on the application brought a number of challenges to the group. Considering the level at which group members worked in their own countries meant adjustment to thinking on a transnational level. This meant gaining knowledge on variance in research policy infrastructure and processes across countries and at the European level. It also highlighted the need to keep such awareness to the fore in subsequent negotiations within the group, as there was the likelihood that some decisions may have posed national difficulties for some members. There was also evidence of cultural differences in perceptions and approaches to working with the EC, perhaps reflecting national stances. Some partners had a strong history and experience of European partnerships, others less so.

There was also the adjustment to differing social and work cultures. Thus, variations around daily work patterns and national holidays, combined with the priority level that members could afford to give to the project, at times impacted on the availability of NWG members to give timely responses. Most communication, the fourth C, was conducted by email with drafting and redrafting of sections of the lengthy application being commented on. Telephone conferencing, coordinated by Scotland, was used for decision making on key issues. Two face-to-face meetings took place, coinciding with meetings with EC officials. Not all members could participate in all events because of demanding work

schedules, and at times this meant a lengthening in timelines for decisions. In the main, however, members had the authority to make decisions on behalf of their organizations, thus reducing further potential delays. The further into the collaborative process, the greater the level of consensus – the fifth C – within the decision making required. This may have been due to an enhanced understanding of national positions and a willingness to work through and around issues as appropriate.

Language was also a challenge. All communication within the group and with Brussels was undertaken in English, but this was the second or third language of at least half the group members. Awareness of non-understanding of terms and phrases or more commonly the speed of speech was more easily managed in face-to-face communication, where facial cues could be seen. All group members were given timely reminders on this issue, especially at the outset of telephone conferencing. Those with English as their first language took 'editing rights' on the application. Terminology at times became a challenge, in particular where there was no obvious translation that would enable understanding of a term, for example, 'capacity building'.

The NWG members set clear deadlines for the phases of work in consideration that five partners in the form of country and regional representatives were contributing to the application, and some of the communication challenges already discussed. These locally set deadlines were well in advance of the official deadlines from the funding body, so that some slippage could occur without hampering the process. In the main, members accepted that failure to meet a comment deadline meant the work moved forward without their input at that stage unless the issue was judged to be critical.

Individual working and benefits

While the process of writing the application was a group activity, there was also background working on 'home ground' by individual NWG members. This included seeking and gaining support for the application from key stakeholders at professional and research policy levels. In some cases, this was made explicit, so that letters of support accompanied the application. At other times, this work including briefing and communicating progress in different arenas, both formal and informal. In some countries, the process of application could be viewed as fitting into explicit strategic frameworks for research, thus supporting national agendas. The commitment of the individuals involved, while time consuming, enhanced individual professional development. Everyone had something to bring to the table, including some of the basic ingredients for a research community identified by Jackson (2005) as energy, ideas, enthusiasm, expertise and, above all, willingness to share and learn. Over time, each member of the group has played to their individual strengths whether that be in facilitation, strategic thinking, writing or specific knowledge and expertise.

Success

Notice of the success of the application entitled ERA-CARE was made to the central coordinator. The NWG was supplied with feedback from the expert peer reviewers. The judgement criteria were: the project content that included relevance, quality of the support action and potential impact and the project management, which included quality of the management and the proposed budget. In keeping with being successful in gaining the award of funding, the reviewers' comments were extremely positive. Especially noted were the timeliness of the project considering the position of nursing and midwifery and the development of its research base across Europe, a further example of Rafferty & Traynor's (2004a) contingency, and the clear, concise and focused nature of the proposal. The sixth C, credit, came in the form of this success and acknowledgement from those whose leadership initially supported the bid.

Conclusion

The success of this project will ultimately be judged on the project implementation and deliverables. However, gaining the funding to undertake the project is a first vital step. The NWG learnt much in the months leading up to the application submission, some of which, it is hoped, this paper captures. Important lessons have been learnt on the way and are applicable to others who may wish to work collaboratively across national borders. These include having a vision that is ambitious but achievable. While professional drive is important, this factor alone will not achieve in the larger funding arena of Europe; policy involvement needs to be demonstrated. As the project now moves into the implementation phase, with the potential for a larger working group in possible subsequent applications, basic practicalities around language and work culture will require constant factoring into future work. In addition, new members will require the adjustment to thinking on a transnational level and bring with them a readiness to learn and work with other countries' systems and structures. The experience of the NWG has been enlightening and ultimately positive. Failure to achieve the goal was always a possibility; however, exposing the group to that risk meant valuable lessons could be learnt and shared internationally for the profession. In addition, the possibility of nursing and midwifery making a major contribution to health care in Europe would be enhanced if its research base for practice was strengthened. Collaboration, such as that described here between national researcher policymakers, could ensure that vision becomes a reality.

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