Reviewer's report

Title: Evaluating Institutional Capacity for Research Ethics in Africa: A Case Study from Botswana

Version: 1 Date: 7 August 2012

Reviewer: Catherine Molyneux

Reviewer's report:

This is a straight-forward well written paper on a topic of interest in the region. The goals of the paper are clearly outlined, as is the (appropriately mixed) methodological approach for developing the ‘Octagon’. The paper is well written with a few typos as outlined below.

Discretionary revisions:

I would have been interested to hear more about the potential limitations of this approach as a way of assessing institutional research ethics capacity, beyond the limitation of it not being appropriate for comparisons across institutions. For instance beyond the structures and systems, would organisational culture be of interest to consider? Also, was any preparation needed regarding the objective of the activity to minimise the hawthorn effect in people’s responses? Was it important that people were aware that this was part of a collaborative partnership with the evaluators, that that the team of evaluators included people from the institution, to minimise the potential for respondents feeling tested?

Given the main stated value of the tool is the ability to stimulate institutions to think about how they operate and how they can improve themselves in the arena of research ethics, and the FABTP outline of their Programme in the background, I would have been interested to hear more about how the findings would feed back into the FABTP in Botswana. Similarly I would have been interested to hear the outcome of the differences between the internal and external octagons because this might have implications for the value of the external approach alone/or it being prioritised above the internal one.

Minor essential revisions - Typos

Abstract –
- Line 4 – remove ‘tend to’
- Line 2 in methods – ‘assesses’ should be ‘assess’
- Line 1 results needs ‘the’ before University of Botswana
- In results – not sure why highlight ‘identity’ as an example, since this is one that is considered to be strong? Highlight that this is one where there was difference between internal and external… also highlight that the findings you highlight at the beginning of the findings section are the external evaluation…
Main document –
- Throughout, refs should come before full stops?
- Background para 2 line 6 – missing ‘on’ before transparency
- Page 21, insert ‘the’ before ‘Focus group discussion…’
- Page 25 insert ‘the’ in third line before the bottom before ‘research ethics system’

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests