Reviewer's report

Title: Developing training and leadership capacity in health workforce development: a collaborative initiative of universities from four sub Saharan countries

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Reviewer: Joseph C Kolars

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This manuscript reflects what appears to be a very interesting initiative that is innovative and very important for the region. A strength is the dialogue regarding the problem they are trying to address and the advocacy for programs of this kind. I've re-read the paper several times and struggle with my inability to state what it is that has actually been done and its effectiveness. I say this with some hesitation because this is a terrific group at a first-class institution that I know has something very important to say.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. As currently written, I'm unable to fully grasp the points of the article. When I saw the title, I was hoping to understand how the program was designed, implemented, or evaluated. There are hints and components to each of these but none are fully developed. While the authors do emphasize (e.g. bottom of pg 3) that they are early in their journey and that talk of outcomes is premature, they also use language suggesting that they do in fact have some evidence that speaks to this approach (e.g. 'demonstrate' in the opening sentence of the abstract conclusion - what in fact is being demonstrated?). As written, it is difficult to understand the specifics of the program (i.e. the intervention) in a way that could be reproduced or approached elsewhere. How was it designed? Did health system leadership participate? The 'Components of the Intervention' are spoken of broadly on pg 5 but begs the question as to how they were determined? How might it be evaluated down the road? How does this program build on what can already be found at the four institutions? Perhaps these components are already embedded in the article but they are not hanging together, at least for me, in a way that I can state them back after several readings.

2. On page 3, 'Case methodology' moves quickly into a description of how 'the eighteen trainees enrolled in the Master of Public Health (MPH) programme' were interviewed. This is an abrupt transition, in light of the fact that the reader doesn't yet have an understanding of what the program consists of. Its not apparent how they were interviewed, how that information was captured or synthesized for the paper, and where their views are indeed reflected in the manuscript. There must have been some diversity to their opinions but where is this reflected? I'm not certain this component is even necessary for the paper if point 1. above is better addressed. At a minimum, case description needs to
precede any talk of methodology.

3. The paper is long and redundant in places. Advocacy for the idea and the problem that its trying to address keep coming up. Often, components of the intervention are explained with concomittant advocacy or critique (as opposed to separating the description of the intervention from its critique). And components such mentorship would be best addressed in one place instead of the several areas in the paper that speak to this.

4. I don't see the substantiation for statements such as 'The lessons highlighted here address the following:

# The importance of recognising and managing key stakeholders as well as local contexts through all parts of the programme.' on pg 8.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. The writing is clear although some of the wording is 'folksy' and more open to interpretation. The following examples could be replaced with more specific terms: 'conundrum', abstract conclusion; 'truism' background pg 2; 'aggravated' 'eviscerated' pg 3;

2. Referencing could be stronger. For example, the statement '... there has been a poor record of implementing such policies.' on page 2 doesn't have a reference. And what was meant by this? There is documentation that implementation is poor (i.e. evidence of a problem)? Of that there is no documentation of implementation (meaning that the documentation itself may be the problem). Also, in the last paragraph on pg 2 'IJsselmuiden et al' in the first line doesn't have a reference. And later in the paragraph, 'the author of Afrihealth' - what does this pertain to? These are examples of a pattern that exists elsewhere as well - the need to be more intentional with referencing.

3. New ideas/perspectives are being presented in the 'Conclusion' which should be avoided.

4. Table 1 headings need some further clarity. 'year established' presumably means the School as well as the specific program that is mentioned?; the last column, is this how many are currently enrolled? enrolled to date? matriculated that year? graduated that year?

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:
No competing interests