Reviewer's report

Title: Developing health systems research capacities through north-south partnership: an evaluation of collaboration in South Africa and Thailand

Version: 1 Date: 21 May 2008

Reviewer: Karen Barnes

Reviewer's report:

General
This manuscript provides an important assessment of whether a programme initiated to strengthen health systems research capacity in the south achieved its goal. This is innovative and provides a useful model to support evaluation of goals that have frequently been considered “immeasurable”, despite considerable human and financial resources being dedicated to health systems research capacity strengthening.

Major compulsory Revisions
1. Although the focus of this assessment is the benefit to the southern partners, the manuscript would be substantially improved if the authors balanced the discussion by including comment on the benefits to the northern institution of this collaboration.

Minor essential revisions
1. Title: suggest “…collaboration with South…” rather than “…collaboration in South…”
2. Abstract, Results and Discussion: suggest avoid the term “significant” strengthening, as this frequently implies statistical significance, which was not tested in this assessment.
3. Abstract conclusion: “southern partners are under pressure to broaden their funding base” is inconsistent the with financing section, which states that “[northern institutions] struggle to get funding more than [southern institutions] do now”.
4. Methods, last sentence of para 2 should read: “Therefore, qualitative (not quantitative) data were considered equally important.”
5. Methods, para 3: more detail on method of analysis of qualitative data is needed.
6. Results: the statement that “joint projects…contributed significantly to institutional income” should be supported by data on the value of funds received for these, and as a proportion of total funds.
7. Results (and Table 5) would be substantially improved by including data on conference presentations (and possibly reports).
8. Institutionalising trust: discussion of the pivotal role of the joint post repeats much of what is stated under results (2nd last para).

9. Sustaining capacity: please confirm whether all staff "lost" remained in South Africa.

10. Table 1: Clarify whether 1st author papers are by southern partner.

11. Table 2: Wording of footnote clumsy.

12. Table 3: Clarify if these are post grads who have enrolled for or who have completed training.

13. Table 4: Totals do not tally with sum of staff per year.

14. Table 5: The number of projects / papers reported in Table 5 do not appear to tally. For example, the new joint projects are reported to total 19, but the sum of those per year is only 18, as reported in the text. The total number of new joint projects funded per year does not tally with the "joint projects" reported by institution. There is similar inconsistency between those reported per year by institution and the last column, partnership totals.

**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:**

I declare that I have no competing interests