Reviewer's report

Title: Approaches and impact of research capacity building models in sub-Saharan Africa: a systematic review

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Reviewer: Alan Boyd

Reviewer's report:

- Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

The introduction needs to better situate the focus on individual capacity strengthening through training within the wider context of the need for capacity strengthening at organisational and systems levels (E.g. through provision of infrastructure, networking), and the provision of other types of capacity building for individuals (E.g. mentoring – this is mentioned later in the article, but not drawn out sufficiently). Either the research needs to be extended to cover more ground (see below), or the title and abstract need modifying to reflect the actual scope of topic which has been investigated, which is narrower. The use of “models” in the title doesn’t seem accurate either.

I am not sure that the review has found all of the relevant literature. A couple of possible examples that I am aware of:


I would like to be reassured that the search/inclusion criteria have covered the field.

Related to this, not including grey literature is a major limitation in my view, in a piece of research that aims to describe the field and does not conduct any explicit quality assessment of the evaluations included in the review.

The article correctly identifies limitations of the review, but then casts these as limitations of previous researchers and evaluators, in not providing sufficient contextual information and not publishing in academic journals. In doing this, there is no recognition of the format of academic journals (albeit less so these days, with online publishing of tables, datasets etc.) constraining authors’ reporting of context. In my view, instead of bemoaning this, which is of little
value, the researchers should have engaged with the grey literature.

For example, I have analysed various evaluation reports of health research capacity strengthening initiatives in my own research:


The lack of quality assessment makes it hard to know how much credence to place in the challenges that the evaluations, and hence the review, identify. The review appears to take the evaluations at face value rather than critiquing them, although later in the article the need for better evaluations is referred to. More critique and analysis of the evaluations would strengthen the article and help to ground the conclusions.

Detailing numbers of outputs from the capacity building (Eg 357 research studies conducted) is not very helpful as a way of indicating impact. How many individuals received training, and over what periods were the outputs measured? Some of this information is provided in Table 1, but it could be better structured even here. The presentation needs rethinking.

The findings need to be assessed in the light of previous research, which has identified similar challenges for research capacity strengthening. The analysis could usefully reflect on what is actually different about non-academic training compared with academic training, based on these studies. Not that much, it would appear to me ….

- Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures or the wrong use of a term which the author can be trusted to correct)

- Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

I would have liked to have seen more justification of the restriction to sub-Saharan Africa, or, preferably, an extension of the research to cover developing countries in Asia and Latin America. Why would research capacity strengthening of people in such countries not be of interest, especially considering the “descriptive” aim of the review.

The description of the nine search terms is repetitive (“research and Africa and health” appears numerous times) and doesn’t communicate the form of the search very well. A diagrammatic representation would be better.

I would have liked the authors to have identified topics/questions for further research as part of their discussion.

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

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.