Reviewer’s report

Title: Specialisation versus special interest - the Australian podiatry experience

Version: 1
Date: 22 May 2015

Reviewer: Anna Moran

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review your paper. It attempts to address important gaps in our knowledge around specialisation and what this means for professions. Essentially what you are trying to describe in your research is sound and potentially very important.

However in my opinion the way the research has been described, in particular the methods section, currently falls short of the quality required for publication.

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?

No question has been clearly identified nor have study aims been clearly defined. This makes the paper difficult to understand from the outset. A clear statement of the research aims would be very helpful.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

Unfortunately the methods section is very poorly described and it is very difficult to gauge what the methods are trying to achieve. This is compounded by the lack of clear research aims to guide understanding.

Although I think I understand what is trying to be measured, much greater clarity if expression is required. An example here is the line ‘Self-perception of podiatry description as “specialist” or “generalist”, or “generalist with a special interest” was asked, as was professional development through continuing education and professional qualification.’ I am unsure what is specifically being asked of the participant and what is being measured.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

No. Although descriptive analysis is appropriate for a survey, there is no identification of scales used to measure the questions. Perhaps a copy of the questionnaire would assist this.

The authors vaguely mention grouping of some variables and describe the use of Chi Square analysis. I am not a statistician, however with research aims not being present, it is difficult to understand why Chi Square analyses were required, how they were administered, and what parameters were used (df, p values etc). The statement ‘Some calculations of Chi Square were done combining specialists and generalists with a special interest to bring greater
statistical power to the calculation.' does not help to clarify things.

There are examples of where data analysis has been explained later in the paper (under results or in the discussion) which I would have found more helpful if contained in the methods section, perhaps under a heading ‘analysis’. For example in results (p7) the following analyses are described – ‘There were two areas of special interest with very similar group sizes: Sports and biomechanics (n=65) and Diabetes (n=63). Analysis was performed on comparison within the biomechanics specialist group to find if there were activities that adequately described a podiatrist with a special interest in biomechanics.’ And in the discussion section - ‘Self -perception of specialist status was not explained by years of experience, location, working in rural versus urban environment, state worked in, or part-time/full-time work status.’ Moving information like this to the methods section may assist with addressing the above concerns.

4. Do the figures appear to be genuine, i.e. without evidence of manipulation?
Yes, however perhaps due to uploading issues the tables are difficult to read. Multiple ‘special characters’ (e.g. $@#) appear on the tables that disfigure the content.

5. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
No.

6. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
See point 8 below. Due to a lack of clear and coherent expression, the paper is difficult to understand. The discussion and conclusions therefore require significant re-writing to be better aligned with the data. Again clear research aims from the outset would perhaps assist the authors to better structure the paper.

7. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
The title is accurate however the abstract requires significant work to better convey both the methods used and the results.

8. Is the writing acceptable?
The writing is not ideal. There are broad issues with the way information has been described in this paper such that many of the statements made are confusing or disjointed. This makes the paper difficult to understand in its entirety. I have given some examples below under the heading ‘minor revisions’ however most paragraphs require some work on expression, grammar, punctuation, structure and/or content.

• Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
Essentially what you are trying to describe in your research is sound and potentially very important. However the way the research has been described, in particular the methods section, currently falls short of the quality required for publication.

In my opinion, the major revisions required for this paper to be published should include –

I. A statement describing the research aims and overall research question (s)

II. Significantly greater clarity of methods used in the research and how these meet the research aims. This needs to include clear and significantly more comprehensive sections on a) the questionnaire questions and scales and b) data analysis, in particular the application of Chi Square analyses.

III. Significant editing of each paragraph to improve and correct expression, grammar, punctuation and structure. The paper needs to be better structured around the research aims.

IV. The data contained in the tables needs to be clearer.

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

I. There are numerous areas where cases, plurals and tenses need attention. Some examples include -

• Data is plural (e.g. Abstract, Methods ‘Descriptive data was collected over a three-week interval and collated into a report for presentation to the Council’). Sentence should read data were collected.

• Abstract, Results ‘Podiatrists in this survey predominately work in private practices (75%), were female (66%), in multi-podiatrists centers (41%) and early career (34%).’ Issues here with past and present tense being used in the same sentence and plurals being used incorrectly.

• Background, ‘In addition to the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law, NRAS made provision for the creation of an independent national accreditation authority, The Australian and New Zealand Podiatry Accreditation Council (ANZPAC)’. ‘The’ should be lower case.

• Practice (noun) Vs Practise (verb) is confused in places.

II. Some statements need to be referenced - examples

• Background ‘The 2005 Productivity Commission Report on Australia’s Health workforce was a major catalyst for a change in thinking about innovative ways to address this chronic burden of disease.’

• Background p 5 ‘Extended scope of practice is defined as: a discrete knowledge and skill base additional to the recognised scope of practice of a
professions and/or regulatory context of a particular jurisdiction.’

III. Some statements need clarification – a selection of examples

• Abstract, Results ‘Number of podiatrists participating in the survey was (n=218). Podiatrists in this survey predominately work in private practices (75%), were female (66%), in multi-podiatrists centers (41%) and early career (34%).’ This sentence needs re-wording. Currently it is difficult to understand what you are trying to express.

• Background ‘More precisely, this paper aims to aid in conceptualising what is scope through activity -based analysis by generalists versus specialist podiatrists, defined by self-perception.’ I’m not sure I understand this statement.

• Background ‘With a move to title only definitions of professional regulation, there has been an opportunity for health care practitioners to develop special skills and attributes to more adequately meet the needs of the community.’ I’m not sure what this means.

• Background, heading Drivers of change to professional boundaries and scope - ‘The forces for change in professional boundaries are often driven by factors external to a profession. Nancarrow [4] described many of these changes from a health consumer perspective: changing societal expectations and beliefs, unmet demand and consumer preferences, then to managerial changes: management philosophies of distribution of resources’. Do you mean …many of these forces (rather than changes?)

• Background, heading Drivers of change to professional boundaries and scope - ‘This is supported by Borthwick [5], who in addition to managerialism through reorganisation of the NHS listed marketisation as a driver for change and incorporation of the specialisation of podiatric surgeon through general practitioner fund holding. I’m not sure I understand this statement.

• A number of acronyms appear in the paper. Although they have been defined at the end of the paper in a list of abbreviations, it is usually helpful to define them from the outset in the paper. E.g. NHS needs to be defined earlier in the paper (currently it is defined on p5 but referred to on p3). U.K needs to be defined. CADCAM needs to be defined.

• Background, heading Managerial drivers – ‘Australia’s podiatry workforce differs to the U.K model by being predominately delivered in the private sector [6] rather than a federally funded NHS model. Thus the motivation to pursue a career in podiatry is affected by different contextual influences.’ It isn’t clear how this relates to the heading of managerial drivers.

• Background, heading Managerial drivers – ‘A small cohort study of Australian podiatrists [7] found differences in perceptions of the profession between Australian and British podiatrists based on work context, educational institution and client group. The study described the importance of perceived status with
specialisation versus routine podiatry and maintenance of control over key tasks and extended scope of practice.’ It seems like this is an important point – the latter half of the paragraph however needs rewording to make the point clearer.

- Background, heading Consumer focused driver of change- ‘Working to full scope of practice has been added to the taxonomy of allied health models of care in a recent report for health workforce Australia [12]. The practice of working to full scope sits above support roles, such as allied health assistants but below advanced practice allied health practitioners on scale of triage/ assessment or treatment. Full scope of practice doesn’t require additional training, or changes to legislation.’ The latter half of this statement doesn’t make much sense and is an important point to clarify.

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

I. I’m not sure the headings in the background section are helpful for the reader.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I have published extensively with the third author, Susan Nancarrow. However a) I have no connection to this research nor have I discussed this research with Susan and b) in view of my critique, I don’t think my relationship with Susan has had any bearing on my capacity to fairly review this paper