Reviewer’s report

Title: Co-producing public involvement training with members of the public and research organisations in the East Midlands: Creating, delivering and evaluating the lay assessor training programme

Version: 0 Date: 29 Nov 2016

Reviewer: David Evans

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting and original paper which describes an innovative lay assessor training programme. It describes well why the programme was established, the content of the training, the experiences of participants and the learning by the working group. I would like to see it published but it is problematic as currently presented. My main concern relates to whether it is or is not a research paper. You have submitted it as a research paper and it includes many of the usual characteristics of a research paper (methods section, results etc) and in your Acknowledgements you state ‘this article presents independent research funded by the NIHR ...’. But at other points (especially p 12) you claim it is not research and reference the HRA in doing so. As you believe it not be research you have not submitted for ethical review or received ethical approval, yet you claim those informants whose quotes you use have given ‘informed consent’; it is unclear to me how they can give genuinely informed consent unless they have been given REC approved participant information sheets and consent forms.

I sympathise with you because this is a complex area with unclear boundaries, but I think you need to do more on this. In particular, you need to recognise that what counts as research for the HRA and what counts as research in academia/academic publishing are different things. So I agree this is not research in HRA terms but I think for RIE and the universities involved this is human participant research and so you should have got university ethical approval as several of your co-authors have university appointments; at the very least you need a statement from a relevant university that this is not research in their terms either. Ideally, I think it would be good if you could get retrospective ethical approval, as this is clearly low risk ethically, and if given, that would address the issue. I would hope that you could make the case that when this was simply a training programme, it did not require ethical approval, but as soon as you decided to evaluate it for academic publication, it became a research process requiring one.

This leads me to my second main issue. It is not clear but it appears that you decided to evaluate it early on for learning purposes (hence pre and post course questionnaires) but that you only latter decided to work this up to a more substantial evaluation for publication. So most of the discussion of methods relates to the training programme methods not the evaluation methods which are only minimally discussed. If this is really a research paper then I think you need much...
more discussion of evaluation methodology. Did you have an evaluation protocol at the beginning with clear evaluation questions and a framework for analysis? You are authors (and deliverers) of both the training programme and the evaluation; this needs some discussion. There are good practical reasons why you have done this, but also it raises problematic issues not least of potential bias. There is no discussion of these issues, what decisions you made and why, and what the implications are for the discussion of your results. I also note that you modified Kirkpatrick's training evaluation model to replace his level 4 'results' with 'future development'. This is a major change which should have been flagged to the reader.

In terms of the results, your overall findings are plausible and convincing, except I think you need to treat your changes in pre and post Likert scores with more caution. There are a number of reasons why the scores may have improved aside from the benefits of the course including random chance (numbers of participants are small), that non-responders may have been the more dissatisfied of participants thus introducing bias, and that those responding may have been influenced by the Hawthorne effect.

If you are able to address the above points, I would welcome seeing this paper published as I'm not aware of another article reporting on a regional approach to lay assessor training.

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