

Initiatives for Medical Education Research at the International Medical University

Ramesh Chandra Jutti, Vishna Devi Nadarajah, Victor Lim

Abstract: Medical Education research is a relatively new field but one that is progressing rapidly worldwide. This article is an attempt to take stock of the current status of Medical Education research in International Medical University and to explore the various factors that have influenced its direction. It also shares some of the initiatives that have been instituted or intended to be instituted at our university.

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In the local scenario, Medical Education research is relatively new and still at its infancy. This is apparent when one takes into consideration the quantum of grants obtained for Medical Education research at International Medical University (IMU) for the year 2007 (RM 50,000 out of a total of RM 500,000) and the number of papers that were published in this area (7 out of a total of 109). Out of the 87 research proposals approved by the IMU Research and Ethics Committee last year, only 5 were related to Medical Education. However, when one takes into consideration the number of presentations for 2007, Medical Education related presentations accounted for 66 out of a total of 266. Therefore, this suggests that awareness and interest in conducting Medical Education research may not be that much of an issue at IMU. However, this raises the question as to why such a wide gap exists between the number of presentations and the number of publications, an issue that needs to be explored and analysed further.

In the current scenario, there is no dedicated funding set aside for conducting research in Medical Education. Access to funding for Medical Education research is through the main IMU Research and Ethics Committee. Until recently, all Medical Education research proposals have to go through the main IMU Research and Ethics Committee for approval and the general perception amongst the faculty is that unlike proposals in other areas, Medical Education research

proposals are more difficult to get the committee's approval. On the one hand there is this perceived difficulty in undertaking Medical Education research at IMU, while, on the other hand the quality of research proposals submitted in this area is undeniably an issue. Lack of expertise and training in Qualitative research, lack of trained supervisors and full-time psychometricians, lack of a strong peer review process reflects the type / level of research – mainly audits, retrospective studies and questionnaire studies and provides some clues as to why a wide gap exists between the number of presentations and publications. Compounding this is the fact that for the majority of the faculty, Medical Education research is outside of one's own core area of practice. A "Teaching focused teachers" and a perception that Medical Education research is not rewarding are additional factors that might contribute to this situation.

On a positive note, IMU with its innovative curriculum offers an ideal opportunity to carry out research in this area. Due recognition of Medical Education research by IMU's higher management is a major incentive to undertake research in this area. Funds are available to attend Medical education conferences and to undertake certification programmes in Medical Education. Publications and grants obtained for Medical Education research are also taken into consideration for the promotion exercise.

Several initiatives have been taken by the Centre for Medical Education (CtME) in the recent past to improve the level of Medical Education research. Focused research groups- Medical Education research Groups (MERG) have been formed with the purpose of generating interest and awareness, initiating and discussing research ideas and aligning faculties with similar interests. As an exercise to build capacity for research, faculties interested in medical education have been appointed as fellows of CtME. They will work towards developing innovative ideas in curriculum and assessment and carry out appropriate research in the relevant areas.

Centre for Medical Education, International Medical University, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

For correspondence:

Professor RC Jutti, Academic Dean, Clinical School, International Medical University, Jalan Rasah, Seremban 70300, Negeri Sembilan, MALAYSIA
Email: rameshchandra_jutti@imu.edu.my

With CtME representation in the main Ethics and research committee and establishment of a robust system of vetting research proposals by CtME, it is hoped that the quality of Medical Education research will improve.

Collaboration with University of Queensland which started this year has provided the opportunity for discussion of research ideas, faculty training and supervision of research projects. A workshop on qualitative research was conducted by the University of Queensland and will be repeated on a periodic basis.

Faculty is also encouraged to undertake research degrees in Medical Education and some are in the process of writing their research proposals.

Strengthening ones understanding of educational concepts and components of medical education, improving ones teaching and facilitating abilities would go a long way in broadening ones approach to Medical Education. In order to achieve this, mandatory certification in Medical Education would be a way forward and CtME is in the process of developing such

a programme locally. Similarly, a robust system of rewarding teaching excellence will be implemented soon.

Setting Targets

The key achievement indicators for these Medical Education research initiatives include internal and external Quality Assurance for current and innovative Medical Education tools, faculty training, research achievements and external collaboration.

Niche areas identified for research include issues related to curriculum, e-learning, assessment, students and faculty. A 25% year-on-year increase in research achievements (presentations, publications and grants) for the next 5 years seems a reasonable and achievable target. In terms of Quality Assurance for current and innovative Medical Education tools and faculty training, the current level of activity needs to be sustained. Thus far, the outcome of these initiatives is satisfactory, propelling further interest for Medical Education research.