

The development and utility of frameworks designed to evaluate research capacity building initiatives in healthcare settings: a methodological review

Authors

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The challenge

Health services increasingly aim to strengthen the research skills of staff so they can design and deliver care based on the best available evidence. Within the DELIVER program, several activities have focused on building research capacity, so that health services and health professionals can do research and use research in their practice. When thinking about the evaluation of these activities, we identified an important question: how can we measure whether research capacity is improving in a clear and consistent way?

We knew of some published frameworks that guide the evaluation of research capacity, but we did not know how many other frameworks were available, how they had been developed, or how they were being used in real-world health settings. Without this information, it was difficult to determine which framework would be most suitable for evaluating research capacity in health services.

What we did

We carried out a review of the published literature to identify frameworks designed to help evaluate research capacity in health service settings, and to understand how these frameworks have been used.

We used a methodological review approach, which allowed us to examine:

- how each framework was developed
- how they have been applied in practice
- their strengths and limitations as identified by framework developers and users.

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The review was completed in two phases:

1. **A systematic search** of seven research databases to find frameworks for evaluating research capacity
2. **A citation search**, which involved checking the reference lists of included frameworks and reviewing studies that had cited (i.e., referred to) them.

What we found

We identified **nine frameworks** for evaluating research capacity in health settings.

The frameworks were developed in different ways: some were based on earlier frameworks, while others drew on case studies, organisational documents, or consultation with health service leaders and researchers. Most frameworks included:

- an overall structure (for example, components at system, organisation, team or individual levels)
- mid-level components or domains (for example, principles, activities or objectives of research capacity building)
- specific outcomes or indicators that can be used to assess research capacity (for example, research partnerships/collaborations, infrastructure, training, qualifications, outputs or funding).

We also found **37 studies** that had used these frameworks to evaluate research capacity.

[Cooke's \(2005\) framework](#) was used most often. The frameworks were used for different purposes, such as to guide data collection or analysis, or program development. In many studies, researchers applied selected parts of a framework rather than using it in full.

Both framework developers and users described strengths and limitations, particularly relating to how frameworks were created and their usefulness in everyday health service environments. Several researchers adapted or expanded the frameworks based on what they learned through their evaluations.

What does this mean for evaluating research capacity in western Victoria?

Frameworks provide a useful structure for evaluating research capacity in a consistent and high-quality way. At least nine frameworks are available for use, and many build on earlier work. Some researchers used selected parts of the frameworks, indicating that they may have been focused on measuring certain aspects of research capacity. It may also reflect barriers to measuring some research capacity building outcomes.

Researchers and health services can strengthen evaluation practice by:

- using updated frameworks;
- adapting and building on frameworks based on local experience so that these continue to develop and evolve as the field of research capacity building does;
- being transparent about why they chose to use a particular framework, how it was used, and why,
- and contributing new insights to future framework development.

Through the DELIVER program, there are opportunities to identify outcome areas and indicators that are particularly relevant to rural and regional health settings, helping ensure that evaluation approaches reflect the needs and contexts of western Victoria.

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Reference

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The DELIVER Research Project:

- Identifies what the people and healthcare providers of western Victoria need most in terms of home-based healthcare services
- Designs and tests the best way to deliver these services, so that home-based healthcare services will continue to grow and improve across the region and beyond
- Supports the growth of research in western Victoria, so that future research findings can quickly be translated to improvements in healthcare

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