The Operational Challenges of International Research Collaborations

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Collaborative networks for research are powerful. They facilitate faster collection of data and broader generalisability of findings. They also potentially allow smaller centres and less experienced researchers to participate in projects under the mentorship of the study centre. In structure, they may be formally constituted aiming to undertake multiple projects in a specialist field (e.g. Paediatric Research in Emergency Departments International Collaborative (PREDICT) [1]) or project-based and inclusive (e.g. Asia, Australia and New Zealand Dyspnoea in Emergency Medicine (AANZDEM)).[2]

Recently the Joseph Epstein Centre for Emergency Medicine Research (JECMR) has been the lead site for the HEAD (Headache in ED) study, a project-based international collaboration across Europe, the Middle East, South East Asia, Australia and New Zealand. The operational aspects of this project highlight the challenges of large, international research collaborations especially with respect to research governance and administrative processes.

JECMR prefers to use inclusive, flexible networks rather than fixed ones because it promotes participation by smaller centres, harnesses enthusiasm and promotes mentoring of emerging researchers/centres. This approach however is not without its challenges. Approximately 100 sites, approached by email and social media, expressed interest in participation in the HEAD study - of which 74 eventually contributed data. JECMR prepared and submitted all Australian Ethics Submissions (including those not covered by the National Mutual Acceptance (NMA) process). Although participating sites were responsible for submission of their Research Governance Application, JECMR assisted most sites with the preparation and submission. Data was entered by local data collectors as de-identified data onto REDcap – a secure on-line platform. [3]

The administrative and operational challenges summarised in Table 1 demonstrate the complexity of making a project like this happen and the resources needed. These should not be under-estimated when planning a project-based collaborative study in a flexible inclusive network. That said, the relationships built with participating sites and research offices are invaluable.

Table 1: Operational and administrative challenges

Process	Challenges
Researchers	Sensitively working with researchers to establish if they realistically had capacity for the project.
	Managing database access for 155 local researchers.
	Achieving timely data entry.
	Nomination of a 'go-to' person for urgent actions, e.g. signatures.
Australian Human Research Ethics Committees (HREC)	Despite national mutual acceptance processes, eight separate applications were required to cover Australian sites.
	Multiple HREC platforms are in use, all requiring different processes and log-ins.
Research Governance Office(RGO)	51 separate research governance applications were prepared for Australian sites. The governance submission process changed at some sites whilst the application was in progress.
	Some research Governance Organisations (RNG) would not accept the waiver of consent approved by the reviewing HREC, even though the HREC approval was via the NMA process.

	Some states had additional legislative requirements, e.g. Public Health Act approval in Queensland and Data Release request in Northern Territory.
	69 collaborative research agreements/ memorandums of understanding were negotiated.
	JECEMR was required to apply to be an accredited research organisation in Belgium.

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