

Project: Enhancing the Student Experience of Research-based Learning and Writing

Case Study

Mini-Project Details

Mini-Project Title	Scaffolding the Research Publication Process¹
School / Department	Centre for Sports and Exercise Medicine, IHSE, Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, QMUL
Staff Involved	Dylan Morrissey, Mark Perry, Steph Hemmings, Steve Greenwald, Olwyn Westwood, Nicola Maffulli, Christian Barton

1. Context / background

Previous work in the Centre for Sports and Exercise Medicine (CSEM) has shown that the intellect and industry of able students is not always matched by their writing ability. Students on intercalated BSc (iBSc) courses often produce work that is suitable for publication but it requires significant extra writing support in order to get through peer review.

This mini-project worked with students after their intercalating in order to:

1. increase the publication rate of these students' research via mentorship from expert writers in publication writing and submission;
2. describe the characteristics of successful student mentoring from both students' and experts' perspectives in order to inform future teaching delivery on intercalated BSc courses.

2. Assessment

The primary assessment outcome was 'publishability' of the students' work as judged by the number of paper submissions to peer-reviewed journals.

3. Research-based learning rationale

First, students are completing typical research projects or literature reviews to enhance knowledge within the wider Sports and Exercise Medicine (SEM) community. To do this, they need to complete and write up novel research from which potential readers can learn. Second, working with experts as mentors may be a way of shedding light for the students on the process of preparing one's research for publication.

4. Writing rationale

Publication is an important part of the research process in the medical field and is highly regarded. The pieces of work that the students worked on were research or review papers aiming for journal publication. It has been identified that these papers often have very good content and potential for publication. However, due to inexperience the students often lack the know-how necessary to achieve publication. The idea behind this mini-project was for students to get far more assistance

¹ The original mini-project this case study is based on was titled SODOTO – See One, Do One, Teach One.

(e.g. multiple drafts) and time (e.g. multiple meetings) from staff to improve their writing compared to traditional processes (i.e. feedback on one draft of the project before submission).

5. Overall progress in 2010-2011

The project was far more difficult than initially thought. A total of nine iBSc students and seven mentors were initially recruited in the summer after the students had completed their intercalating year. The mid-project review indicated that it was not working as originally intended - most students had only met with their mentors on one occasion and, overall, they were making far slower progress with publishing their work than originally anticipated. A student focus group held in March pointed to a number of possible reasons for these difficulties, including the following: finding time to work on manuscript drafts and/or meet with mentors as the students had gone back to studying for their medical degree, inadequate data or content in the original piece of work, communication breakdowns with co-authors and lack of support with some aspects of the publication process.

In the light of the feedback from the focus group, the strategy for supporting students was rethought for both the existing and subsequent cohorts of students. Instead of stretching the period of support out across the academic year, it was decided to offer a 'writing retreat' experience immediately after iBSc graduation and before students got caught up with further study. The first retreat took place in June 2011 and was an intensive 3-day course spread over a Monday, Wednesday and Friday, which involved lectures on the publication process from academics and past students, close supervision from mentors and timed slots to do some writing. The retreat appears to have been successful with generally positive feedback, and students reporting a number of benefits such as increased knowledge about publication process and requirements, intensive interaction with their supervisors/mentors, improved writing skills and improved confidence about a publication process. To date, one paper has been submitted and more are expected over the coming months.

By being involved in this mini-project, the facilitators have learnt a number of things:

- Motivation to publish among iBSc students is high but the timing of writing activities needs to be thought out carefully;
- It is possible to propose some effective approaches to facilitating publication, e.g. ensuring data/study is strong enough, ensuring adequate time, acknowledging the need for good communication with mentors (and possibly multiple mentors in some cases);
- The mentoring process is complex and varied, but it has potential in helping to improve students' writing skills;
- Mentoring can be facilitated in a 'writing retreat' type setting.

6. Tutor Reflections

It has been made very clear that finding time to write is the biggest barrier to publication by students after they finish their iBSc degree. There is a period of 2 to 3 months immediately following the degrees' completion where students are on leave from their studies. Unless significant progress towards making their work publishable is achieved during this time, for many the end point may remain too distant to strive toward when their busy study schedule (including placements, study and final exams) recommences. Therefore, it is vital that students are encouraged and assisted by staff to work on their manuscripts in the period immediately following the completion of their iBSc degree, and continuation of the writing retreat may be the most appropriate intervention to facilitate this.