

Short Report

Developing an Independent International Research Team: Research Ensemble for Advancement in Cross-Cultural Healthcare (REACH)

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Abstract

This short report presents an international research group, Research Ensemble for Advancement in Cross-cultural Healthcare (REACH). REACH is an independent research group, and no one is paid to do research for REACH. All members participate because they are intrinsically motivated to pursue cross-cultural healthcare. REACH consists of 28 healthcare workers and educators from 13 countries, researching about cross-cultural issues in healthcare (18 publications on average per year as of February 2024). REACH is multi-disciplinary, synthesising knowledge from areas such as cross-culture, mental health, psychotherapy, psychology, nursing, disabilities, education, and organisational management. We anonymously asked ourselves what the strengths and challenges of REACH were, and thematically analysed the input. Strengths were a sense of community and growth. Challenges were different time zones and practices. We hope our insights will help international researchers organise an international research group.

Keywords

Research group; research culture; cross-cultural team; professional development; team management; cross-cultural research

1. Increasing Importance of Research

A need for rigorous research has been increasing [1]. There are many reasons for this. For example, as the complexity and uncertainty in people’s lives increases, their needs to make informed decisions also increase [2]. Policymakers want to collect rigorous evidence to make informed decisions. This is true in healthcare too. Recent, rigorous research findings and evidence-based practice models will help make informed decisions in healthcare settings [3]. Healthcare practice advances with research [4]. Technologies are essential to many people’s lives today, which continue to expand on their research findings [5]. Translation between research and the real world has been increasingly active [6, 7]. Research can help our decision-making, advance practices and technologies, and improve people’s lives.

Research is also important to researchers. Research output indicates income to universities. For example, in the UK, Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was established in 1986 to evaluate the excellence of research output of each university (we used the term “university” to mean “higher education providers”). Since then, RAEs have taken place in 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008 [8]. RAE has been replaced by a revised version, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), taking place in 2014 and 2021. Now many universities in the UK are preparing for the next REF 2029. In REF, the numbers of 3* (internationally excellent) and 4* (‘world-leading’) papers decide research funding to universities from the UK government for a six-year period [9]. Each year, the UK government gives guidance to Research England, who will decide the allocations of funding. This is public funding, amounting to about £2 billion per year. Of £2 billion, the mainstream quality-related research (QR) funding accounts for £1.3 billion, and the allocations are decided by REF outcomes.

For example, the total mainstream QR funding of the academic year 2023 to 2024 for all REF participated universities (n = 131) was £1,265,619,314 [10]. The top 10 universities who have received the largest funding are in Table 1.

Table 1 Top 10 universities received the largest funding 2023-2024.

No	University	Mainstream QR funds (£)
1	Oxford University	88,053,015
2	University College London	83,175,593
3	University of Cambridge	80,008,603
4	University of Manchester	54,920,878
5	Imperial College London	52,223,693
6	King's College London	46,031,722
7	University of Bristol	39,721,177
8	University of Nottingham	38,176,054
9	University of Leeds	37,775,322
10	University of Sheffield	35,755,210

Large amounts of funds are allocated. Researchers who write papers that are rated highly in the REF criteria can contribute to their university’s REF output. One 4* output is estimated to be worthy of between £5,000 and £25,000 [11]. Research matters to researchers. That is why universities train students and staff to be a good researcher. Demonstrating proficiency in research enhances your

chances of gaining admission to your desired programme and securing a faculty position that aligns with your aspirations.

2. REACH

REACH stands for Research Ensemble for Advancement in Cross-cultural Healthcare led by the first author YK. REACH has formally started in 2022 as he moved to the University of Nottingham. Before this move, YK supported publications of his supervisees and colleagues individually or in small groups, at the University of Derby. These positive relationships continued to grow. To synthesise the knowledge and skills in these relationships, a group was created in 2021. This is the origin of REACH.

REACH is an independent research group. Members do not receive any salary to conduct research for REACH. However, they do research for many reasons, such as career progression, academic programme admission, improving patient care, documenting good healthcare practice, getting public attention to imminent problems, intellectual self-development, and a sense of fulfilment. REACH is an open group, but has three criteria to join: (a) being a writer, not a talker, (b) being supportive of others, and (c) being able to invest time and energy for research. As of February 2024, REACH comprises 28 members who are healthcare workers or educators from 13 countries, synthesising knowledge from areas such as cross-culture, mental health, psychotherapy, psychology, nursing, disabilities, education, and organisational management.

REACH meets online for 30 minutes every two weeks. Because of the time differences and other duties, not all members can attend. Usually 8 to 15 members attend to discuss their projects. Each member shares with others their research area, what tasks in the paper-writing process they are good at, how they want to improve, and the purpose of being involved in REACH. At every meeting, members give updates on each project, ask questions about how to progress when stuck, and discuss new ideas.

In addition to the fortnightly meetings, REACH members share ideas in their WhatsApp group and mailing list. These include introducing interesting articles, job vacancies, funded PhD programmes, and celebrating member successes (e.g., faculty position appointments, programme admissions). We publish 18 papers/chapters yearly on average (as of February 2024).

3. Strengths and Challenges

We believe REACH demonstrates a new collective way to produce research output efficiently. We asked all members what strengths (S) and challenges (C) of REACH were using a shared document on Google Doc [12, 13]. The anonymous editor function was used. To allow all members across different time zones to participate, the document was open for four weeks. Collected data were thematically analysed by YK, which were reviewed by the other authors, using the procedure developed by Braun and Clarke [14]. Two strengths were identified: S1. Sense of community, and S2. Growth. Two challenges were identified: C1. Different time zones, and C2. Different practices.

3.1 S1. Sense of Community

Many members stated that REACH gives them a sense of community that other groups cannot offer. They wanted to join a group where they feel connection but had not found one.

I've been in healthcare and education for more than 25 years but it is uncommon to find a faculty or department, whether in higher education or industries worldwide, with such a collaborative team comprising interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary, intercultural, and international members working in unison.

One strength is knowing you are a part of a group that is trying hard to make the world a better place.

REACH is an international group. In the meetings, WhatsApp group, and mailing list, people from various locations communicate attentively.

Our strengths lie in our well-established network.

REACH helps me keep track of what's happening in different countries. Conversations with members from different countries allow me to compare my situation with theirs and find new ideas to use in specific research projects.

REACH is a virtual research lab connecting members worldwide, providing me with valuable insights into diverse research ideas.

Taken together, REACH is a well-connected community of people from different locations around the world.

3.2 S2. Growth

Growth is a common positive experience among the members. Growth can be categorised into four items: Research skills, opportunities, mentoring, and identity.

3.2.1 Research Skills

REACH is a research group. Members share their expertise and knowledge in research. This can be a helpful online article, YouTube clip, free webinar, review/assessment opportunities, or direct advice.

I have enjoyed attending meetings where/when possible and this has enhanced not only my research skills but also expanded my research interest.

Team members develop valuable skills in time management and remote project coordination, increasing their flexibility and adaptability in a globalised environment.

3.2.2 Opportunities

REACH's operation is inspired by an African proverb "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." This means opportunities or invitations one member receives are often shared with others so that the invited member can save time and other members can benefit from the opportunities and invitations.

Being a member of REACH has taken me out of my comfort zone, which has been both a challenging and rewarding experience. REACH has given me so many research opportunities, which has helped improve my research skills and knowledge, and my CV too!

I work full-time and study part-time while also engaging in regular research activities with REACH. I am always happy to attend meetings when they coincide with my free days. ... meeting minutes are promptly communicated to all members via email, and we stay connected through our group's WhatsApp chat for regular updates.

3.2.3 Mentoring

Mentoring offered from YK was also noted as a strength. Mentoring discussion can take place in a meeting, WhatsApp group, and emails.

In REACH, I receive mentorship that has reshaped my perspective on research, leading me to discover an unexpected passion for it.

3.2.4 Identity

REACH also helps members to create a strong identity as a researcher. Each member is recognised as a researcher, and what they are good at, and what they want to improve on are regularly discussed in the group.

Collaborating with the members to produce high quality, impactful research has helped me as a new researcher to expand my knowledge and academic writing skills, which has been invaluable, as it allows me to contribute to cross-cultural research as part of this diverse group of individuals.

As a PhD student, it is interesting to be able to learn from professionals already trained in this area, as well as giving me the opportunity to contribute to their projects and discover new research topics in other countries.

Our members are not all at the same point in their professional careers. There are members who have already earned a PhD, others who are in the process, and professionals who may be eligible or are simply interested in contributing to research. A research group benefits greatly from both experts and mentees, with the former providing depth of knowledge, direction, and mentoring, while the latter offer fresh perspectives, adaptability, and motivation. The interaction between the two enables a two-way exchange of knowledge, fostering skill development and innovation. The resulting diversity of thought enhances the group's ability to solve complex problems and generate effective solutions, creating a dynamic environment where learning and collaboration mutually enhance each other.

3.3 C1. Different Time Zones

Online meeting with people in different time zones is a challenge. Because members are based in many different countries, no time is perfect for all.

Challenge that I can pinpoint ... is the different geographic locations with different time zones.

Members acknowledge being in different time zones is an unsolvable problem. Some members suggest setting up an in-person meeting can help this attendance gap.

I hope, maybe, to physically see each other.

While this is an inevitable problem, some members not being able to attend for a long time is indeed a challenge. An in-person meeting opportunity can help these members to attend and meet with others.

3.4 C2. Different Practices

Because diverse people work together, difference in working practices can be a challenge. Writing pace and level are markedly different among members. That can cause difficulties working in REACH.

One challenge may be the variability in writing levels and time availability among members, possibly leading to differing opinions, pace, or progress.

Additionally, cultural differences among members can be a challenge, as a concept of the same issue can be very different cross-culturally.

When significant cultural differences exist between countries, it's important to reconsider how certain study topics are approached in each culture.

Because REACH is an open and arbitrary group, people with different skillsets join and work together. This can bring benefits (e.g., being able to work with people whom you have no access to), but also challenges (e.g., different expectations).

4. Future

REACH will continue to work together and produce publications. Communication will remain active, leading to a better sense of community [15]. Different ways of communication will be offered when possible to enhance inclusivity and engagement [16]. At present, those three ways of communication-regular meetings, WhatsApp group, and mailing list are well-supported by members.

In terms of output, while maintaining the number of publications, we will aim to publish in top journals in relevant fields. Sharing articles and other materials such as YouTube clips or recorded webinars from those top journals need to take place more. Networking events with editorial teams and researchers who frequently publish in those journals may be also helpful. Research grants need to be obtained, because it is one of the developmental areas for some members, especially those who work for a university.

5. Conclusion

This short report introduced an independent international research group, REACH. As research increases its importance, a need for producing high-quality research output also gains its importance. REACH works collaboratively to produce prolific output. While research groups operate in different contexts, practices and characteristics of REACH may help improve other research groups. We hope this short report will inspire ideas for other research groups to improve their practices.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation: YK. Writing-draft: YK. Writing-review and edit: all authors.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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