

Establishment and Management of a Multi-Institutional Centre of Research Excellence

TIPS FOR NEW PLAYERS

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BACKGROUND

The Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI) established a network of nine Centres of Research Excellence funded by the Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development (PHCRED) Strategy. The centres were multi-institutional partnerships of two or more institutions (universities and/or non-government organisations), hence the term Multi-Institutional Centre of Research Excellence (MICRE) used in this document. The MICREs, were funded for a period of four or five years to provide a program of research in primary health care policy and system improvement, to build research capacity in primary health care services and to provide the evidence to support the adoption of their research into policy and practice.

Establishing and coordinating a MICRE is complex and time consuming, and there are limited “how to” resources available to those involved. Recognising there were challenges specific to MICREs, and based on their own experiences, Lisa Lavey and Catherine Spooner (both MICRE Managers), and Chilandu Mukuka (Research Manager from the funding body) conducted a study to document these issues experienced and lessons learned by each of the MICREs.

The results of the study revealed six broad areas where MICREs experienced challenges, namely: **1. Budgets; 2. Contracts; 3. Recruitment; 4. Teamwork; 5. Communication; and 6. Research Impact & Knowledge Transfer and Exchange.**

This document has been prepared to assist new investigators, administrators and project coordinators in establishing and managing a MICRE efficiently and effectively, thereby minimising problems associated with operating across multiple sites.

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BUDGETS



Tip 1: Budget for Postdoctoral Fellows

During grant development, ensure all salaries and on-costs for each institution are calculated at the appropriate rate.

Rationale:

Salaries and on-costs for personnel differ across institutions and therefore should not be calculated on the basis of one institution's costing model.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Postdoctoral fellow contracts are shortened or additional funding is needed from other sources.

Key Personnel:

- » Chief investigators;
- » Research, Finance and Human Resources (HR) offices of all institutions.



Tip 2: Budget for MICRE Management and administration

During grant development, ensure MICRE management is adequately funded and supported to accommodate the complexity of working across multiple institutions. Consider:

- > Adequate funding for an experienced and skilled MICRE manager;
- > Sufficient time budgeted for the MICRE manager to undertake their duties;
- > Appropriate administrative assistance to support the MICRE manager;
- > Consider a peer network or mentor to support the position.

Rationale:

- » The workload and skill level required to undertake the MICRE's numerous and complex duties is much higher than that of an individual institution. The contributions of the MICRE manager are critical to ensure efficient administrative processes during the life of the MICRE.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Delays in project commencement and achievement of planned activities;
- » Budget revision is needed to extend the FTE and/or level of the MICRE Manager, thereby compromising other aspects of the research program.

Key Personnel:

- » Chief investigators;
- » Research, Finance and HR offices of each institution;
- » Funding body (to support a manager's network).

CONTRACTS



Tip 3: Head Agreement (fundholder/funding body)

At the beginning of the grant application stage, request a sample agreement from the funding body in order to gain in-principle support from the administering institution's legal office prior to submission.

Rationale:

- » If the administering institution's legal office has an issue with the terms of the Head Agreement, execution of the Agreement will be delayed until these issues can be negotiated and addressed. In a worst case scenario, the administering institution could refuse to sign the Head Agreement at all. Obtaining a sample Head Agreement during the grant application stage would allow time to negotiate any changes prior to submitting the application.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Delays in preparing partner agreements;
- » Delays in the commencement of research and other activities;
- » Delays in recruiting staff

Key Personnel:

- » Chief investigators;
- » Research Office of administering institution;
- » Legal office of administering institution.



Tip 4: Partner Agreements

At the commencement of preparing grant application, provide a copy of the sample Head Agreement from the funding body to all partner institution's legal offices to gain in-principle support prior to submission.

Rationale:

- » Partner institution's legal offices might want to change the terms of the Head Agreement. Providing a sample Head Agreement to partner institution's legal offices during the grant application preparation, would allow time to negotiate any changes prior to submitting the application.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Delays in preparing partner agreements;
- » Partner institutions might refuse to sign partner agreements.
- » Delays in the commencement of research and other activities;
- » Delays in recruiting staff.

Key Personnel:

- » Chief investigators;
- » Research Office of all partner institutions;
- » Legal offices of all partner institutions.



Tip 5: Allocation of partner funding and support

During grant development:

- > Agree on the allocation of funding between the administering institution and partner institutions; or
- > Agree on an efficient process for distributing funding across partner institutions throughout the life of the MICRE;
- > Document funding allocations and processes in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which also takes account of the 'in-kind' contributions from each institution (including investigator salaries, office space, computer equipment, printing, telephone, and internet).

Rationale:

- » The contractual process of distributing funds to partners is complex and time-consuming. Allocations not specified in the grant application require decisions on how the funding is to be distributed. Legal offices from partner institutions might be reluctant to sign agreements that do not contain specified funding for the duration of the MICRE or that do not explicitly specify in-kind contributions.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Delays in execution of partner contracts because time is needed to negotiate the allocations and in-kind contributions.
- » In-kind contributions might not be provided if the partner institution is not aware of what is required and it is not documented in an MOU and partner agreement.

Key Personnel:

- » Chief investigators;
- » Head of Department/Unit of each institution;
- » Finance and legal offices of each institution;
- » MICRE Manager.

RECRUITMENT



Tip 6: Appointment of MICRE Manager

- > As soon as the grant has been awarded, make all preparations for the appointment of the MICRE Manager including position description (sample attached) in line with institution requirements;
- > As soon as the Head Agreement has been executed, recruit the MICRE Manager.

Rationale:

- » Early in the life of the MICRE, it is important for the MICRE Manager to be available to assist in the establishment and management of the MICRE and all associated activities.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Delays in all MICRE activities including execution of partner agreements, distribution of funding, recruitment of postdoctoral fellows, and awarding PhD scholarships.

Key Personnel:

- » Chief investigators;
- » HR Office of institution at which the MICRE Manager will be located.



Tip 7: Recruitment across multiple institutions and sites

When a grant has been awarded, allow enough time for a stream-lined recruitment process in consultation with the administering and partner institutions HR Offices. Options can include:

- > A joint job advertisement across institutions;
- > A two step process:
 1. Place an advertisement seeking expressions of interest in the position/s noting that the position could be at one of several institutions. Decide who will be given the position/s at which institution/s and allocate funding accordingly;
 2. Provide funding for the position to the relevant institutions who then appoint following their own policies.

Ensure flexibility in recruitment to positions so that if an appointment can't be made at one institution, then the funding can flow to one of the other partner institutions.

Rationale:

- » In a MICRE, some positions (postdoctoral fellows, students and staff) can be based at any one (or more) of the partner institutions, depending upon the preference of the applicant. However, HR processes require that a position cannot be recruited unless there is money received for the position and all institution-specific procedures have been followed. So, if it is not decided where the position will be located, normal recruitment processes cannot be followed.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Recruitment of positions can be delayed.

Key Personnel:

- » Chief investigators;
- » MICRE Manager;
- » HR offices of all institutions.

TEAMWORK



Tip 8: Investigator engagement with the MICRE

During grant development:

- > Choose partners wisely - investigators benefit from pre-existing relationships. Further, the number of partners can be important. Cohesion can be difficult with large numbers of investigators;
- > Ensure that all investigators have agreed upon the goals to be achieved by the MICRE, and the roles and responsibilities of its members;
- > Ensure the investigator time required for MICRE activities is realistic;
- > Ensure MICRE activities contribute to the investigator's career and/or are consistent with the expectations of the investigator's institutional role;
- > Budget for face-to-face meetings to maximise team-building opportunities.

During the life of the MICRE:

- > Review the common goals and partnership principles annually;
- > Organise face-to-face meetings or team-building activities - use opportunities such as conferences to meet;
- > Effective collaborative leadership is essential for developing and maintaining investigator engagement.

Rationale:

- » Engagement is a particular challenge for MICREs. Being located across multiple locations, the MICRE team have limited opportunity for face-to-face interaction which can assist with development of relationships.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Lack of engagement of the team limits the development of teamwork, and makes it difficult to achieve MICRE objectives relating to raising the MICRE profile and KTE;
- » Dis-engaged investigators tend to not attend meetings which makes decision-making difficult, limits communication and hinders reporting.

Key Personnel:

- » Chief investigators;
- » MICRE Manager;
- » Team members.



Tip 9: Communication infrastructure

During grant development:

- > Identify the communication infrastructure and support required across the institutions. e.g. video/teleconference, virtual meeting spaces;
- > Confirm what 'in-kind' infrastructure will be provided by each institution;
- > Identify and agree on necessary costs of new equipment, licences, software and/or training;
- > Include costs in the budget or note 'in-kind' contributions.

Rationale:

- » Having the appropriate communication infrastructure will ensure that the MICRE team are able to connect into meetings when meeting face-to-face is not possible.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Difficulty organising meeting times when relying on inadequate infrastructure, such as videoconference rooms;
- » Non-attendance at project meetings impact upon the capacity of investigators to contribute to, and feel part of, the MICRE activities.

Key Personnel:

- » Chief investigators;
- » Research and Finance offices of each institution;
- » Information, Communication & Technology offices of each institution.



Tip 10: Meeting management

As soon as the grant is awarded:

- > Schedule regular meetings for all requirements of the MICRE. A schedule of meeting dates could be prepared at the start of each year with all meetings listed to maximise attendance.

During the life of the MICRE:

- > Ensure that every institution has the capacity to participate via video/teleconference, and that video/teleconference details are provided to participants;
- > Provide necessary training to investigators in the new technology required;
- > Ensure best practice meeting management, including agenda, action list, minutes, timeliness of meetings, reminders;
- > Ensure effective Chairing of meetings to ensure full participation;
- > Provide an easy-to-use reporting template for each meeting;
- > Identify who manages the diaries of investigators and seek their assistance with scheduling meetings.

Rationale:

- » Members of the MICRE team are usually located in different buildings, institutions, cities/towns, countries and time zones. This means that there are inevitably specific challenges in meeting management including:
 - Scheduling meetings - impromptu meetings are less of an option;
 - Reliance on video/teleconference, which may not always be ideal for certain tasks;
 - Attendance at meetings;
 - Participation in meetings, particularly those that are not face-to-face;
 - Perception that there are too many meetings.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Discussions and decisions are made without the input from the full team, resulting in individuals not being involved in the decision-making, not fully aware of what is happening and possibly feeling dis-engaged;
- » Decisions are delayed whenever there are insufficient attendees, or key people are not present.

Key Personnel:

- » Chief investigators;
- » Associate investigators;
- » Team members;
- » Investigator assistants (who manage the diaries).



Tip 11: Recording research activities, impact & knowledge transfer and exchange (KTE)

During grant development:

- > Ensure the reporting requirements to the funding body are explicit and that investigators understand and agree to them.

Early in the life of the MICRE:

- > Develop a KTE plan with indicators for monitoring progress that are consistent with the reporting requirements, updated annually;
- > Develop and maintain a database to record overall research impact and KTE activities (see www.crrerrphc.org.au to access a free database developed by the CRE in Rural and Remote Primary Health Care to record research impact activities);
- > Develop an agreed system to facilitate the MICRE team to report KTE. e.g. Provide a user-friendly template or access to the database where research activities are recorded;
- > Promote to the MICRE team the benefits to themselves as well as to the MICRE of reporting KTE.

During the life of the MICRE:

- > Send regular research / KTE reminders to the MICRE team;
- > Agree on a policy for all members of the MICRE team to declare affiliation with the MICRE in email signatures, journal articles, conference papers, media, etc, and provide templates to assist declarations of affiliation, such as a MICRE logo and text to add to investigator's signature.
- > To ensure the KTE activities of the MICRE are promoted to stakeholders, community, researchers, and the general public, adopt initiatives to raise the profile of the MICRE such as:
 - » A user-friendly and informative website with a link to each institution's website;
 - » A regular newsletter which could include an editorial, updates on current activities/progress, profiles of team members, publications/outputs of the MICRE. This could be distributed in hard copy, electronically, or both. Ensure it can also be accessed on the website;
 - » Other forms of user-friendly communication with stakeholders, community and others i.e. social media (Facebook, twitter).
 - » Celebrate achievements and contributions from the investigators and convey these achievements to the MICRE team. It might also be opportunistic to use social media to promote it, or add this achievement to the website.

For the funding body:

- > Ensure applicants understand the reporting requirements;
- > Fund MICREs to report KTE in a useful/usable manner.

Rationale:

- » The MICRE is complex and relies on information provided by team members from each institution to report to the funding body. Often the information required by funding bodies is not routinely collected by individual institutions. Developing an overall KTE plan and database will assist with the collection of this information, and developing a website and other forms of external communications (such as social media) will also assist with raising the profile of the MICRE and dissemination of information.

Possible impact if this tip is not implemented:

- » Time consuming for MICRE Managers to chase up information *post hoc*;
- » Incomplete reporting of KTE activities and impacts;
- » Lost opportunities to disseminate or follow up KTE outputs;
- » The MICRE profile is not well-established.

Key Personnel:

- » MICRE Managers;
- » Chief investigators;
- » Funding bodies;
- » Team members.

MICRE MANAGER POSITION

Given the complex nature of a MICRE, the MICRE Manager role is critical to its success. Below is a list of duties that you may like to consider when writing the position description for the MICRE Manager position.

Key result areas and responsibility

Project Management

- > Provide executive support to the project and coordinate communications between all personnel and members of the MICRE to ensure high quality performance of the Project.
- > Manage the development, maintenance and implementation of processes and systems to ensure conformity across all MICRE sites, and with stakeholder standards and policies.
- > Ensure the effective collection, collation and reporting of MICRE information according to timeframes and deliverables as set out in the Work Plan and Funding Agreement.
- > Liaise regularly with the Director, Chief Investigators and Stream Leaders regarding the status/progress of activities across all MICRE sites to ensure that major milestones are met and delivered within budget.
- > Actively participate in management meetings (including Chief Investigator meetings and the National Advisory Committee), project reviews and other discussions and provide management reports on all aspects of the MICRE as required.
- > Regularly review MICRE policies and processes and develop strategies that ensure continuous improvement and growth of the MICRE as required.
- > Provide contributions to strategic documents, policies and procedures as required.
- > Provide effective liaison between the administering institution, funding body, and all partner institutions and be the first point of contact for stakeholders and team members.
- > Foster the development and maintenance of a strong customer service orientation within the MICRE.
- > Coordinate MICRE activities with relevant stakeholders including the establishment and maintenance of productive relationships with all stakeholders and MICRE members to ensure appropriate project updates, handover of materials and reporting are completed.
- > Assist in establishing systems and support structures that ensure the MICRE meets its obligations to regulatory bodies and implements appropriate risk management and compliance procedures.
- > Coordinate MICRE recruitment activities.
- > Undertake special projects, including promotion of the MICRE activities and coordination of visiting scholars, as requested by the Director such as the development and maintenance of the MICRE website.
- > Identify and assess relevant funding opportunities and projects relevant to the MICRE.

Finance Management

- > Manage and monitor the MICRE budget, and prepare financial performance reports for the multiple stakeholders across the MICRE.
- > Coordinate the administrative requirements with the relevant Finance Services teams and any other relevant group, in the establishment of accounts and other compliance requirements to be obtained before payment occurs.
- > Manage the budget process in consultation with the Chief Investigator and Stream Leaders, undertaking forecasting, identification of costing, and formulation of annual income/expenditure budgets for the MICRE.
- > Ensure expenditure is incurred against contract conditions and within contract budget.
- > Reconcile contract funds, and prepare monthly revenue and expenditure statements for discussion with MICRE leaders.
- > Ensure fiscal responsibility, efficiency and accuracy in all areas of the MICRE budget.

MICRE MANAGER POSITION continued...

Below are some criteria that you may like to consider in writing your position description and recruiting the MICRE Manager.

Key selection criteria

Essential

1. Tertiary qualifications in a relevant discipline with a substantial level of experience in a busy work environment or demonstrated extensive expertise in high level project management and administration;
2. Excellent organisational skills with a high level of attention to detail and the ability to prioritise tasks, reassess priorities in light of emerging issues, plan administrative tasks effectively, work under pressure to meet tight and competing deadlines, anticipate future requirements, and monitor and review procedures.
3. Well-developed analytical and problem-solving skills plus a high degree of initiative, with proven ability to instigate and undertake tasks with minimum supervision or direction.
4. Excellent written and oral communication skills with a demonstrated ability to communicate and negotiate at all levels within research and external organisations.
5. High standard of proficiency in the use of software packages (e.g. Word, Excel, Powerpoint, Access, InDesign), and the ability to present information in a variety of formats, including written, graphical and tabulated forms.
6. Detailed knowledge of systems, processes and issues in a large and complex organisation, including the Commonwealth Government.
7. Demonstrated ability to work independently as well as part of a team. Ability to build successful relationships with MICRE stakeholders, spanning community, services and government.

Desirable

1. Experience in a tertiary education;
2. Membership of an appropriate research management organisation such as the Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS).

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