

Research and Information Mentors

Thematic analysis of activity records report

March-July 2018



Introduction

This report has been prepared at the request of the Research and Information Mentors Governance group. The report covers the reporting period from March to the end of July 2018. Information from submitted Research and Information Mentor activity records has been analysed and categorised so as to identify the emerging themes of the work and role of the first group of Research and Information Mentors. Thirteen mentors form Group 1 and out of a possible 65 activity records, 37 have been submitted.

What information is sought on the activity records?

The activity records are submitted by the Research and Information Mentor each month. The records ask for the following information: list the Mentor activities engaged in during the last month, what progress has been made in relation to individual/local area plans, what challenges have you encountered in the last month, indicate the number of staff you engaged with in your role as a mentor in the last month, list the disciplines of the staff you were engaged with in your role as a mentor, indicate the total amount of time spent allocated to the role in the last month, list the contact you had with your NRO team member assigned to you. In relation to planning for the month ahead, what is your plan for the month ahead, what do you need from the NRO to support you in the role in the coming month, any additional supports required and to end the report there is an option to note any additional comments.

Why are the activity records important?

The records are important as they are a tool to gather information about how the mentors are progressing, the challenges faced, amount of time spent on the role and the disciplines whom they interact with. It is an opportunity to flag any concerns or additional supports that they require from the NRO. The records allow for the strategy lead to identify patterns over time and most importantly that the role is aligned with the strategy aims, description and vision for the role in practice. Mentors have protected allocated time to dedicate to the role and the records should reflect this time or where there are challenges to allocating the time this can be flagged. Furthermore the information from the reports will be captured thematically on an on-going basis and will also be included in an annual report detailing the progress of the implementation of the strategy. This report will also be used to identify additional training needs and will inform future work plans.

Thematic Analysis

From a review of the records received for March –July 2019 the following themes emerged:

Communication	Challenges
Skills Development	Supports-staying in contact with the NRO
Working with each other	Supports- what is required
Time	Research ethics
Engaging with a range of teams and disciplines	Practitioner research
Making progress and future planning	Supporting staff undertaking academic research
	Comments

A list of summary points and next steps will conclude the analysis.

Communication

All the activity records included reference to communication with colleagues about the role. This had been encouraged at the training in January and it appears from the records that this was the starting point for most mentors. Methods of communication included delivering presentations about their role within the context of the Research and Information Strategy at their own local team meetings and delivering presentations to other teams in their regions. Mentors communicated their role through email using the letter of introduction provided by the NRO. Mentors reported that they had informal discussions with colleagues and managers about the role. Mentors circulated research office leaflets on the available databases and journals. Mentors engaged in creative methods of communication for example one designed a leaflet describing the role and shared with the group for their use and another created a flag which several mentors have included on their email address. In response to emails sent out, some mentors have had queries back from colleagues and some have had email and telephone correspondence with colleagues mainly about Athens sign on, research ethics and searches for articles.

Skills Development

The records suggest that time has been allocated by mentors to familiarise themselves with the Tusla research centre and the databases and journals available. It was noted often in the records that mentors wanted to practice database search skills and that they want to be confident in these skills before demonstrating to others. Some mentors sought advice and guidance from the NRO in order to respond to queries about applying to Tusla for ethical approval. Some mentors registered and completed an online seminar in academic writing skills (with Maynooth University) and this was promoted internally by the group through YAMMER.

Working with each other

Core to the strategy is the interdisciplinary nature of the mentors group that forms a national network across all four regions of the agency. The activity records capture some examples of mentors working together. The Research and Information Mentors YAMMER group was repeatedly referred to as a good source of information. A support group for mentors in DNE was established and has met once to date. Some mentors have met in pairs to discuss and prepare presentations for delivery to staff groups, this in turn may support the cross disciplinary nature of the role allowing some mentors access to staff groups that they would not ordinarily know. Some mentors are already known to each other and now have the shared experience of the role to further develop a partnership approach to reaching out to staff in their respective areas. Most mentors attended one of two regional meetings organised by the NRO earlier in the year and this was an opportunity to reconnect and hear about the early steps taken by others. Records reported that mentors would like to hear about what others are doing and while some mentors have already engaged and established relationships with one another, further connections will need to be established to best coordinate and avoid duplication into the future.

Time
<p>Mentors should have four hours protected time weekly to allocate to the role and how this time is allocated is at the mentors own discretion within the boundaries of the role described in the research and Information mentors strategy. As stated above, just over half of the possible number of records for the time specified was submitted and within those records the number of hours allocated to the role was not always recorded. What is recorded is only a partial reflection of the time allocated to the role. In total, according to what was documented on the activity records a total of 341 hours were spent on the role over the period of March to July. The number of hours each month varied across the records and where the hours were low there was often an explanation. While some mentors cited allocating time as a challenge, others cited that it was difficult to allocate the time to meeting colleagues due to busy and crisis response workloads, some meetings had been cancelled or rescheduled a number of times. Some mentors have successfully managed to allocate the required 4 hours to the role on a weekly basis.</p>
Engaging with a range of teams and disciplines
<p>Presentations were noted to have been delivered across a wide range of teams and groups working in the agency for example: PPFS management teams, peer learning support groups, parental participation group, adoption social work team, CYCPC coordinators, fostering social work managers, area manager groups, social work and family support teams, residential care teams, educational welfare team and out of hours social work teams.</p> <p>Mentors reported the variety of disciplines they have interacted with and are listed as follows: Educational Welfare Officers, Child Protection Case Conference Chair, Principal Social Workers, CYPSC coordinators, General manager, Area Manager, Duty intake social workers, child protection social workers, PPFS staff, alternative care staff, social work team leaders, business support staff, project workers, social care workers, administration staff, voluntary agencies, children first information and advice officers, EWS regional manager, crisis intervention and out of hours social work teams, child care workers, social care workers in residential teams, social care managers, service managers, regional residential care managers, social care workers in outreach services, PPFS services and family support services, Social care leaders, centre manager, psychologist, training officers, occupational therapist and a Meitheal coordinator.</p>
Making progress and future planning
<p>Overall, there was a variety in the activities recorded and mentors planned to continue with their communication of the role by continuing to liaise and inform staff about the strategy. Some mentors wanted to dig a bit deeper and start to identify what the research areas of interest were for colleagues. Other plans included: providing encouragement and support to staff, to disseminate information about the role and to disseminate relevant research, to provide one to one EBSCO training, to make contact with the WLD team, to read research and to check the journal links and functionality of links on the Tusla Research Centre, to distribute more leaflets, to schedule presentations, to establish a lunchtime article club so as to generate a research culture and to extend this to other staff, to plan to meet up with other mentors, to meet with the DNE group of mentors, to spend time looking at the databases available, to present the strategy to residential care</p>

services, to become more confident in using Athens, to approach staff who are already undertaking research, to work with another mentor to focus on how to engage social care staff, to discuss with supervisors how research can be included in Professional Development Planning, to explore the idea of facilitation skills training for the mentors group to support future delivery of presentations.

Challenges

For some mentors, allocating their time to the role was a challenge. Securing time with colleagues was also a challenge especially for those in front line services with some appointments and presentations having to be rescheduled. Coordinating meetings with those who have busy caseloads proved challenging. Many reported that annual leave had impacted on the allocation of time to the role, this is unavoidable nonetheless it was recorded as an explanation where mentors did not achieve their weekly four hours for the role. Some cited demands of their substantive post and in one case a HIQA investigation took priority. Some comments recorded stated that mentors had not been contacted by colleagues nor had they received responses to emails sent out by them, however in one case this has improved over time. One comment recorded stated that it was a challenge to allocate the time and to not feel guilty about it. Another recorded challenge was defining the role as separate to their substantive post. One mentor reported generally that staff want access to research quickly and that engaging staff in a learning culture is a challenge.

Supports – Staying in contact with the NRO

Most records stated that mentors had met with their NRO team member face to face, had regular email contact and telephone contact. Mentors recorded where they had attended the regional meetings organised earlier in the year. One mentor stated that the contact with the NRO *'keeps me focused'*.

Support – What is required

Overall, the mentors identified continual, on-going support was needed and asked that advice and guidance would be available if required. Records show that mentors found YAMMER to be a good resource. Mentors asked for more training in the online resources and for guidance and direction on what is expected of the role with a suggestion of identifying specific tasks to undertake. Also a request for a standard response to staff who approach mentors wishing to undertake research was sought. Another request in relation to using research evidence in court reports was recorded, this too emerged in the DNE support group meeting in July. One request was in relation to assistance seeking availability of training rooms in Brunel for presentations.

Research ethics

Queries in relation to grounds for an application to the Tusla Research Ethics review group have been recorded and these have subsequently been dealt with by the NRO. Two mentors have engaged in conversations and have supported colleagues who are applying for ethical approval. Others have provided information about the research ethics process to agency staff as and when requested.

Practitioner Research
<p>Some mentors were aware of and interacted with colleagues who were engaged in practitioner research. One such example saw a mentor agree to meet monthly to support the development of the proposal through research questions, exploration of methodologies and research ethics application advice. Another mentor was approached and invited to discuss potential research and evaluation ideas for a family support service.</p>
Supporting Agency staff undertaking academic research
<p>Mentors recorded where they interacted with or supported their colleagues who were undertaking research for academic courses. This included PhD, MA and MSc academic programmes. Assistance provided was for example assisting with applying for research ethics approval, database searching and coding of data. There was a query in relation to what academic courses are available. There were 2 queries in relation to availability of research skills training and practitioner research.</p>
Mentors comments
<p>The record asks for mentors to make a comment at the end. The comments included a range of ideas and reflections for example:</p> <p><i>I need to be confident about using the databases, Athens, EBSCO...YAMMER forum is great.</i></p> <p><i>...positive about the role but am aware that I have to develop the role.</i></p> <p><i>Really enjoying the role but I feel I'm at the very start of the process.</i></p> <p><i>It would be helpful to look at alternative ways of disseminating information on the mentoring programme to staff.</i></p> <p><i>I think going forward, if we are to promote a culture of research then we should perhaps think about focusing on research integrity and responsibilities as a researcher.</i></p> <p><i>Delighted to be working with Angela and Bernard, will be delighted to put my EBSCO training into practice...it's all learning.</i></p> <p><i>Have been using the electronic resources a lot...a really great resource and have been able to source all the articles I was looking for.</i></p> <p><i>Would really like to develop the area of research integrity as an integral part of the mentoring programme.</i></p> <p><i>I continue to struggle to get people to buy into the strategy. The buy in from upper management is not strong.</i></p> <p><i>I am surprised at how well this is being received on the ground despite not yet formally engaging with staff through existing structures.</i></p> <p><i>I think this is gathering momentum and I am still enjoying the role. The online resources are a</i></p>

massive bonus and are being hugely welcomed by staff teams.

This is such a positive development within Tusla to be spreading the work of the research dept. and especially the availability of the online journals and access to Barnardos library.

Summary Points

- The activities reported on the records indicate that the Research and Information Mentors have been positively received by the agency.
- Mentors are promoting the strategy and their role in targeted communication with colleagues however there are some geographical gaps in this communication mainly in the South and the North West.
- There is evidence of mentors working together and forming partnerships within the network.
- Mentors require time to practice newly acquired database search skills and have sought additional training.
- Some mentors encountered challenges in allocating time to the role.
- Within the agency, some frontline staff face challenges in allocating their time to access mentors available to them.
- Mentors are a resource to agency staff undertaking academic qualifications.
- Mentors are a support to practitioner researchers engaged in research within the agency.
- The communication of Tusla's Research Ethics review process has been increased throughout the agency.
- Mentors have engaged well with the NRO and are enthusiastic for the development of the role in their local areas.

Next Steps

- Continue to record activities on a monthly basis.
- Review the recording form to include drop down menus and options for ease of completion.
- Inclusion on the activity record of a question on subject area, information or research need.
- Further training on database search skills.
- Continued communication of the strategy and promotion of the role throughout the agency.
- Promotion of the Tusla Research Centre and Barnardos Library and Information partnership.
- Encouragement of all staff to access Research and Information Mentors.
- To use this report to inform the development of a work plan for 2019.