The experience of using a structured professional development scheme to measure health research capacity development among healthcare workers in low and middle-income countries

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Introduction: Despite supporting health research capacity development (HRCD) has been recognised for the past decades as an important need within the global health discourse, the literature shows that the need for structured measurement of research capacities in low and middle-income countries (LIMC) remains a critical element to be explored.

Methods: A mixed-methods explanatory sequential design was applied. The use of the Professional Development Scheme (PDS), developed by TGHN and WHO-TDR was implemented among 47 healthcare workers (HCW) in Brazil, Thailand and Zambia. The research capacity score generated by the PDS was collected at two time points.

A selected group of participants were then interviewed to describe their experience in using the PDS.

Results: Among the 47 participants 32 updated the PDS for the second time generating a variance in their score. The scores dataset was statistically analysed showing an overall decrease in the number of competencies that receive a score throughout the exercise of self-scoring required by the PDS. A significant variance in some of the areas of research competencies measured by the PDS was reported between the two time points. No difference in research competencies by country or profession was registered. The analysis of the data collected on explanatory qualitative in-depth interviews revealed that the PDS results being a long exercise. The aim of using the PDS is not always fully understood and affects users’ engagement with it. An evident missing link with possible training opportunities was recurrently highlighted among the participants.

Conclusions: The actual version of the PDS represents a template for adaptation. The various possible applications of the PDS should be clearly presented to individuals, teams and institutions to avoid misalignment of expectations. A link to training material on the research competencies that the PDS identify as needing improvement should be implemented.