The OMERACT Emerging Leaders program: The good, the bad and the future

Caroline A Flurey MSc PhD CPsychol FHEA[1], Peter S Tugwell MD MSc FRCPC[2], Rachel J Black MBBS FRACP[3], Serena Halls MSc PhD[1], Matthew J Page BBSc (Hons) PhD[4], Joanna C Robson BSc PhD MRCP[1], Ilfita Sahbudin BM MSc MRCP[5], Heidi J Siddle BSc (Hons) MSc PhD[6], Premarani Sinnathurai[7] BSc(Med) MBBS FRACP, Kathryn S Stok PhD[8], Bethan Richards MBBS (Hons) MSc[9]

Author affiliations:

[1]Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK
[2]Division of Rheumatology, Department of Medicine, and School of Epidemiology and Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, University of Ottawa, ; Clinical Epidemiology Program, Ottawa Hospital Research Institute, Ottawa Canada
[3]Rheumatology Unit, Royal Adelaide Hospital, Adelaide, Australia
[4]School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
[5]Rheumatology Research Group, Institute Inflammation and Ageing, University of Birmingham, UK.
[6]Leeds Institute of Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal Medicine, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK
[7]Rheumatology Department, Royal North Shore Hospital, and Sydney Medical School, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia
[8]Department of Biomedical Engineering, The University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia
[9] Department of Rheumatology, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, and Sydney Medical School, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Corresponding author: Dr Caroline Flurey
Postal address:　　　　University of the West of England
　　　　　　　　　　　　Frenchay Campus
　　　　　　　　　　　　Coldharbour Road
　　　　　　　　　　　　BS16 1QY
Tel: 0117 3281795
Email: Caroline2.Flurey@uwe.ac.uk

Abstract

Objective: To describe the experience of the first OMERACT Emerging Leaders Program (ELP).

Methods: A Delphi process identified positive aspects, areas for improvement and future directions. Core items were defined as ≥70% ratings of being 'essential'.

Results: Participants valued relatable/accessible mentors (100%), including an OMERACT Executive mentor (100%); and a support network of peers (90%). Key items for future development were funding support (100%); and developing knowledge about OMERACT processes (90%) and politics (80%).

Conclusion: The ELP has the potential to provide targeted training for early career researchers to develop relevant skills for future leadership roles within OMERACT.

Outcome Measures in Rheumatology (OMERACT) is an international network of patients, clinicians, researchers, methodologists, and industry representatives, which aims to improve and standardise outcome measurement in musculoskeletal clinical trials through a data driven consensus process (1, 2). At a biennial conference, delegates have the opportunity to review and debate evidence presented by the working groups (WGs) in facilitated sessions. Views expressed in these breakout sessions are then discussed with the wider group at a plenary session, and final consensus is sought via interactive voting (1). A key principle of OMERACT is that all delegates have an active role. To help new delegates navigate the process and effectively contribute, education programs, including the Newbies (3), Fellows, and Patient programs, have been developed (4).

The Fellows program was developed to educate and mentor early career researchers in the methods of OMERACT. It involves an opening session introducing participants to OMERACT history, philosophy, concept and process, followed by daily mentor sessions to ensure comprehension and solidify understanding (4).

Until 2018, participants could only attend the OMERACT Fellow program once, becoming regular delegates at subsequent meetings (4). This model presented a lost opportunity for OMERACT to further develop "returning fellows" with the skills, knowledge, experience and networks needed to develop into OMERACT leadership roles such as a working group co-chair, or member of the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) or the Executive, and thus ensure sustainability. Following feedback from OMERACT 2016, and to address this gap, the Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) was piloted at OMERACT 2018.

Each OMERACT Emerging Leader (EL) was assigned three Fellows to mentor, daily sessions provided skills training and mentoring, and ELs were an available resource for WGs needing rapporteurs. This report describes participants' experiences, and suggestions for improving the ELP.

Materials and Methods

Participants: Fourteen registered returning OMERACT Fellows were invited to participate in the ELP by email two weeks before the meeting. The email described the ELP as "a new initiative to better support you and offer you opportunities to develop valuable networks and skills. As future leaders of OMERACT, we are keen to support you in developing more advanced skills and competencies in the OMERACT Process and Methods". Of these 9/14 took part in the ELP (described in Table 1). Of the five returning fellows choosing not to participate, two of them citied insufficient time within the OMERACT conference as a reason, others did not provide a reason. Following the meeting, all participants and the ELP convener were invited to take part in a Delphi survey (n=10) to evaluate the ELP. Demographic data were collected via email.

Delphi Process: The Delphi process (5) was used to identify: (1) What were the positive aspects of the ELP? (2) What are the areas for improvement for the ELP? (3) What solutions do you propose to improve the ELP? At OMERACT 2018 the Emerging Leaders were asked to brainstorm possible responses ('items') for each of these questions, which were recorded by an experienced facilitator (BR). Participants were invited to submit additional items to the lead author (CF) by email. The Delphi survey was conducted online using DelphiManager. Participants scored each item from 1 to 9 into categories of not important (1-3); important (4-6); and essential (7-9). Items receiving ≥70% consensus as important/essential (4-9) were taken forward into the next round. At the end of Round 1, participants were invited to provide additional items for inclusion in subsequent rounds. In Rounds 2 and 3 participants were shown their previous response, and the percentage distribution of other participants' responses for each item.

Finally, the 9 ELs were asked three yes/no questions: 'Overall do you think the ELP was successful?'; 'Would you consider taking part in a similar program in the future?'; and 'Would you recommend the ELP to a colleague?'.

Ethics approval was not required. Tacit consent to publish these data was received as all participants have contributed as co-authors.

Results

Participants: All nine ELs and one ELP convener (BR) participated in all three rounds of the Delphi survey (n=10). The majority (9/10) were female with a mean age of 37 years (SD: 3.60). Five were from the UK and five were from Australia. Four ELs were Rheumatologists, three were researchers, one was a Consultant Podiatrist and one a Biomedical Engineer, the EL convener was a Rheumatologist.

What were the positive aspects of the ELP? Twenty positive aspects of the program were identified (Table 2). All items received >70% consensus that they were important or essential to the success of the ELP in Rounds 1 & 2 and ≥80% consensus in Round 3. Twelve items received ≥70% consensus that they were *essential* to the success of the program (Table 2). The top five according to mean score (range 0-9) were: 'Conveners as relatable/accessible mentors' (mean: 8.8; 100% consensus); 'having a support network of peers' (mean: 8.6; 90% consensus); 'OMERACT Executive representative as a mentor' (mean: 8.5; 100% consensus); 'development and strengthening of networks with other ELs' (mean: 8.3; 100% consensus); and 'having a purpose at OMERACT in addition to the standard program' (e.g. having an identity beyond being a delegate, having dedicated evening sessions) (mean 8.2; 100% consensus).

What are the areas for improvement for the ELP? Six areas for improvement were identified (Table 2). Five items received >70% consensus that they were either important or essential to the success of the ELP in Round 1 and were taken forward to Round 2. Four items received >70% consensus that they were either important or essential in Round 2 and were taken forward to Round 3. In Round 3, all four remaining items reached ≥80% consensus that they were *either* important or essential (Table 2). Ranked by mean score, these were 'discovering extra responsibilities as ELs after agreeing to participate' (mean: 6.3; consensus 80%); 'not being sure what to expect from the program' (mean: 6.3; consensus: 100%); 'lack of planned sessions to spend time with mentees' (mean: 5.6; consensus: 80%); and 'being given short notice when asked to participate in the ELP' (mean: 5.4; 100%). Consensus was

reached (100%) that being given short notice to participate was important but not essential. However, no consensus could be reached on whether remaining items were important or essential.

What solutions do you propose to improve the ELP? Twenty three solutions to improve the ELP were identified, including 12 added during Round 1 of the Delphi (Table 2). All items received >70% consensus that they were either important or essential for future development of the program in Rounds 1 & 2 and ≥90% consensus in Round 3. Thirteen items received ≥70% consensus that they were *essential* for future development of the ELP (Table 2). The top five according to mean score (range 0-9) were 'funding support for ELs' (Mean: 8.4; Consensus: 100%); 'opportunity to gain higher level knowledge about OMERACT (technical) processes' (i.e. the methods required for the development and endorsement of core domain and outcome measurement sets) (Mean: 7.8; Consensus: 90%); %); 'opportunity to gain higher level knowledge about OMERACT politics' (the governance and operational structure e.g. how to establish a SIG, how to navigate the route to become a WG co-chair, or of the TAG or Executive) (Mean: 7.7; Consensus: 80%); 'opportunity to learn about working group structures and how they should be led/managed' (Mean: 7.6; Consensus: 100%); and 'opportunity to learn facilitation skills' (Mean: 7.5; Consensus: 100%).

Nine ELs (100%) reported 'yes' the ELP was successful, they would take part in a similar program in future and would recommend it to a colleague.

Discussion

This report describes the first OMERACT ELP, and identifies positive aspects, areas for improvement and potential solutions for developing the program. The pilot program was received well with all participants reporting they considered it successful, would take part in future similar programs, and would recommend it to colleagues.

Items receiving consensus as essential to the success of the program were predominantly related to mentorship and support, personal and professional development and contributing to 'collaboration and collegiality' of OMERACT. The latter has been previously reported as a key aspect delegates value about OMERACT (6). However, the importance of developing specific skills in younger OMERACT participants such as mentoring, delivering effective feedback and facilitation has not previously been reported. Opportunities for practical skill development in a supportive environment likely contributed to the perceived value of this program (7).

Other benefits included the positive experience associated with mentoring. This was the first year Fellows were allocated an EL mentor in addition to their OMERACT Executive mentor. This extra level of support provided further opportunities for mentoring skill development, peer support and networking.

No areas for improvement were considered essential to the success of the ELP. This was the first time this program was implemented with limited planning time, therefore areas for improvement relating to more information and advance notice will be easily addressed for OMERACT 2020.

Funding support for ELs to attend OMERACT received the highest mean score for improving the ELP. It is likely this reflects the difficulty faced by early career researchers in accessing institutional funding needed to attend OMERACT meetings. Areas for future development felt to be essential, focussed on opportunities to learn more about the technical processes and politics of OMERACT, continuing to develop existing skills and contributing to OMERACT in more senior roles. Ideas for skills development fell into three broad categories: Mentoring and feedback; Methodology, process and politics; and Facilitation and leadership. As EL numbers increase in future years, and with limited time available at each meeting to deliver targeted face-to-face workshops, a proposed model for future ELPs with three streams is shown in Figure 1. This model provides a structure that aligns with the skills, knowledge and experience required to take on leadership roles in OMERACT.

This report is limited by the small number of participants from only two continents. However, all ELs took part and 100% completion was achieved in all rounds of the Delphi survey. Important positive areas were identified and key suggestions for development of the ELP have been formulated.

The 2018 OMERACT ELP was positively received and provided a targeted, supportive training opportunity for early career researchers. Inclusion of an ELP program in future OMERACT meetings is recommended. For inclusivity, opening the ELP invitation to all returning OMERACT participants (including returning 'newbies' and returning ELs) should be considered. Encouraging cross-generational relationships with formal mentoring, providing skills-based learning opportunities and sharing institutional knowledge may benefit OMERACT in terms of succession planning, efficiency of process and organisational culture.

Acknowledgements

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