



## CORRESPONDENCE

## Sustained research capacity after completing a Structured Operational Research and Training (SORT IT) course

N. Guillermin,<sup>1</sup> S. dar Berger,<sup>1</sup> K. Bissell,<sup>1</sup> A. M. V. Kumar,<sup>1,2</sup> A. Ramsay,<sup>3,4</sup> A. J. Reid,<sup>5</sup> R. Zachariah,<sup>5</sup> A. D. Harries<sup>1,6</sup><http://dx.doi.org/10.5588/pha.16.0057>

We systematically assess the post-course output of participants who complete the Structured Operational Research and Training Initiative (SORT IT) courses<sup>1–3</sup> to determine whether the courses, designed for participants in low- and middle-income countries, build sustainable capacity and leadership for operational research. Between January and June 2016, we assessed the output of participants who had successfully completed six SORT IT courses 18 months previously in Fiji, Estonia, Luxembourg, India, Nepal and Ethiopia. Of 71 participants enrolled in the six courses, 67 (94%) successfully completed the course and submitted a scientific paper to a peer-reviewed journal. These successful alumni were all sent structured questionnaires by e-mail, of whom 64 (96%) returned the completed questionnaire.

Of the 64 alumni who responded, 34 (51%) were male and 39 (61%) were medical doctors. Research output is shown in the Table. Following course completion, sustained output, as assessed by completed projects, published papers, conference abstracts/presentations, mentoring/facilitation at further operational research courses and peer-review of scientific papers, was observed in a significant proportion of the

successful alumni, with 45% completing at least one new research project and 36% publishing at least one new research paper since the course finished. Our last report, where the assessment was conducted using the same methodology used here, also showed that course participants produced considerable research output after course completion.<sup>3</sup> As before, fewer alumni obtained new research funding, which is not surprising as most participants used routinely collected data from within their programmes and this does not require substantial financial resources.

While the response rate to the questionnaire was good, at 96%, there were some limitations. We requested information on completed projects and published papers, which may underestimate research output, as it does not take into account projects that have just started or are ongoing. As the findings were based on self-administered questionnaires and conducted by the organisers of the SORT IT courses, there may be bias in our reporting. Finally, we have no knowledge about other training courses attended by alumni after the SORT IT course that may have further contributed to the skills set required to undertake further independent research.

## AFFILIATIONS

- 1 International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union), Paris, France
- 2 The Union South-East Asia Office, New Delhi, India
- 3 Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland
- 4 School of Medicine, University of St Andrews, Fife, Scotland, UK
- 5 Médecins Sans Frontières, Operational Centre Brussels, Luxembourg
- 6 London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, UK

## CORRESPONDENCE

Anthony D Harries  
International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease  
Old Inn Cottage  
Years Lane  
Colden Common  
Winchester SO21 1TQ, UK  
e-mail: [adharries@theunion.org](mailto:adharries@theunion.org)

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**TABLE** Individual and institutional research output of participants 18 months after successfully completing a SORT IT operational research course (January–June 2016)

Research output after the end of the SORT IT course	<i>n</i> (%)
Participants successfully completing a SORT IT course	64
Participants completing a new research project	29 (45)
Total new research projects, <i>n</i>	103
Participants who published a new paper	23 (36)
Total new papers published, <i>n</i>	78
Participants who had an abstract accepted at a conference	33 (52)
Total abstracts accepted, <i>n</i>	68
Participants who presented or showed a poster at a conference	27 (42)
Total presentations/posters, <i>n</i>	49
Participants who mentored / facilitated on an operational research course	17 (27)
Total courses at which participants facilitated, <i>n</i>	34
Participants who peer reviewed a paper for a scientific journal	18 (28)
Total papers peer-reviewed, <i>n</i>	60
Participants whose institutions obtained operational research funding	9/56* (16)
Participants whose institutions engaged with/undertook operational research	29/57* (51)

\*For some participants, the institutions already had funding or were already engaged in conducting operational research and were therefore ineligible to answer this question; the denominator is therefore less than 64.  
SORT IT = Structured Operational Research and Training Initiative.

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Limitations aside, the results are encouraging, suggesting that significant research output continues after the SORT IT courses are completed. We have just enrolled a new programme monitoring and evaluation officer within The Union who will extend our follow-up of alumni to 36 months as well as 18 months and will, through qualitative research, try to understand why some alumni engage in further research while others do not.

### References

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