

Organizing ODIN: a case study in European academic co-operation

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Summary – The European Commission is an increasingly important source of funding for international research projects and is due to announce its Framework 5 program early in 1999. The Outcomes of Depression International Network (ODIN), funded from the current EC Biomed 2 program, is a case study in European academic co-operation. Its organization has three key elements. First, engaging the principal investigators: this has involved identifying potential partners, ensuring reciprocity of interests, effective co-ordination, 'dividing the spoils' in advance, and setting up good personal and electronic communication systems. Second, an *esprit de corps* has been created amongst the researchers, maintaining contact and consistency, and promoting higher degrees. Third, ongoing problems including difficulties in negotiations with the EC, divergence of detailed study methods, and isolation and demoralization amongst researchers, have been addressed. ODIN may provide a useful model for researchers wishing to set up international collaborative groups. © 1999 Elsevier, Paris

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BACKGROUND

International research projects are crucial but complex activities. The European Commission (EC) plays a prominent role in promoting such endeavors through its Framework Programs, the fifth of which begins in 1999. It encourages research collaboration amongst EC member states, through training fellowships, concerted

actions to build networks amongst existing research teams, and increasingly through shared cost grants, to fund new research activity. Within the current Framework Program the EC has developed a biomedical and health research work program (Biomed 2) worth 336 million ecus [1]. Framework 5 is set to have broader thematic and organizational programs than its predecessor. With a total proposed budget of 12,740 million

* The ODIN group is composed of academic colleagues and researchers currently working with ODIN. At 1st August 1998 they included T. Anstorp, J.L. Ayuso-Mateos, K. Benum, P. Cuijpers, I. Davies, J.F. Diez Manrique, G. Dunn, R. Edwards, A. Elneihum, M. Finne, F. Ford, A. Gómez Del Barrio, C. Hayes, A. Higuera, A. Horgan, C. Hosman, T. Koffert, F. Johnstone, N. Jones, L. Lasa, M. Lehtilä, C. McDonough, E. Michalak, C. Murphy, A. Nevra, T. Nummelin, H. Page, A. Schmenger, B. Sohlman, J. Strype.

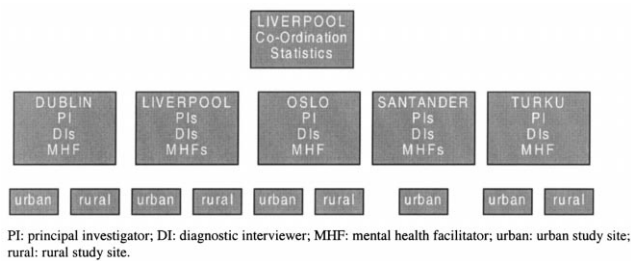


Figure 1. Organizational structure of ODIN.

ecus, some 2,239 million ecus will be devoted to programs aimed at improving the quality of life and management of living resources [2].

In this paper we provide a case study of the organization of a research group which has been successful under Biomed 2. We describe the creation of a research partnership and the development of integrated research teams. We identify management problems and our solutions to them.

ODIN

The Outcomes of Depression International Network (ODIN) is a multi-center study involving general practitioners, nurses, psychiatrists, and psychologists from England, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Wales. Its objectives are to provide data on the prevalence, risk factors and outcomes of depressive disorders in urban and rural areas within the European Union; and to assess the impact of two psychological interventions on the outcome of depression and on health service utilization [3].

ODIN has involved academic partners from the Universities of Liverpool, Nijmegen, Oslo, Santander and Wales, the National University of Ireland, and the STAKES Mental Health Research Group in Turku, Finland. It now covers nine study sites, seven countries, and eight languages. Thirty-eight people are currently involved, including principal investigators, statistical advisers, health economists, diagnostic interviewers, mental health facilitators, secretarial and administrative staff. Its organizational structure is presented in *figure 1*.

ENGAGING THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

Identifying potential partners

The first task was to find a small group of senior academics with track records of relevant research. Two of us (CD and GW) began the planning process. We obtained the somewhat daunting protocol and submission forms from Brussels. We then identified individuals known through international meetings, external examination activities, or previous academic collaboration whom we considered to have the potential to work together over a prolonged period of time. Individuals so approached also recommended other potential partners with whom they had co-operated on previous studies. This process was conducted entirely at distance, through a combination of fax, email and telephone contact. Although many universities now have formal mechanisms for assisting with such connections, we believe that they are a secondary substitute for personal knowledge, since the ability of researchers to work together cannot be assumed from apparent similarity of academic interests.

ENSURING RECIPROCALITY OF INTERESTS

The success of such an enterprise depends on adequate representation of the research interest of every partner. If partners are to commit themselves wholeheartedly to such a complex project, the individuals' own research interests must be represented and promoted, as well as those of the team as a whole. This symbiosis includes both the specific research questions addressed and the methods and instruments used. In ODIN, for instance, individual partners' expertise in the role of social support and personality in the genesis and outcome of depression, and in the effect of depression on health care utilization, have been built into the study objectives. Partners' previous methodological experience led us to prefer certain screening and diagnostic instruments from amongst the plethora available.

CO-ORDINATION

The co-ordinator of ODIN is *primus inter pares*. He maintains the integrity of the project through negotiation and consent, in the context of respect for the knowledge and expertise of all of the principal investigators. He sets and monitors the study framework in consultation with the relevant EC scientific officer and

its (separate) contracts office, implements research milestones, and provides progress reports. He manages the flow of data, including the development of a common data base, regulation of data entry procedures, and provision of statistical support. There is opportunity with EC projects for scientific and administrative co-ordination to be handled by separate individuals, although we have chosen not to do so with ODIN.

DIVISION OF THE SPOILS

It is important at an early stage to agree the distribution of financial resource and academic ownership. This issue is clearest with regard to grant income, which is usually specified in advance, although funding bodies such as the EC may vary their grant distribution after the first year depending on initial levels of expenditure. Rules for access to data and for authorship of conference presentations and publications need to be agreed. We have agreed that international material – whether for publications or postgraduate study – must be accessed through the co-ordinating center, whereas all national data, conferences and publications are the responsibility of the local principal investigator. Authorship of papers drawing on the international data set will usually be joint amongst the principal investigators, with the order of author being determined by the level of activity on each paper. Including ‘the ODIN group’ as last author allows us to recognize researchers who have played a key role in the acquisition and analysis of data for particular papers [4].

COMMUNICATION

Regular face-to-face meetings between the research partners are essential. We meet every six months, with the host rotating amongst the different national partners. The initial tasks were overtly to agree the strategic objectives of the project and clarify the basic research methodology. Covertly, and much more importantly, the task was to establish whether or not a number of disparate, ambitious and successful individuals could work together as a team. Subsequent meetings allow progress to be monitored and later goals, such as conference and publication strategies, to be set. We have found that these meetings need to last for at least two days, and that they work best with a combination of academic, business and social events. The social events are functional, not superfluous. They enable the development of group cohesion and a sense of common

purpose without which a project of this nature could not survive.

Regular meetings must be interspersed and supported by the frequent use of high quality electronic communication systems, of which e-mail and fax are the essential components. We agreed that it would be most effective to adopt English as the common language for the ODIN group.

INVOLVING THE RESEARCH TEAMS

The issues

The major organizational challenge of ODIN has been to create and maintain an *esprit de corps* amongst some 25 researchers, and to link this with adequate training and quality control procedures, despite the differences imposed by language and by geography.

Getting to know you

A meeting was organized in Liverpool in June 1996, to which all the anticipated ODIN research staff were invited. The primary function of the meeting was to provide the diagnostic interviewers and mental health facilitators with the training programs necessary for them to carry out their allotted tasks. Since these programs were deliberately, though with some difficulty, organized in the same place at the same time, it was also possible for all the researchers to learn together about the overall structure and function of ODIN and the significance of their own roles within the group, and to participate in two large social events.

Maintaining contact and consistency

The initial contacts made in this way could then be maintained – as for the principal investigators – through e-mail, fax, and telephone contacts. ODIN uses a democratic e-mail system through which all members of the group have access to one information network.

Follow-up meetings for subsets of researchers have been arranged where possible. In some cases these have been coincident with principal investigators’ meetings, while others have been set up specifically in Oxford and in Utrecht to complete training programs or to facilitate quality control and supervision of the psychological interventions. These meetings have interconnected with the formal use of pre-recorded or research-

generated audiotapes and videotapes to ensure inter-rater reliability and standardization of procedures over time.

The value of higher degrees

It has been the policy of the principal investigators to encourage research staff to undertake ODIN-related higher degrees, and so far 12 members of the ODIN group have done so. This gives added value to the study in terms of detailed enquiry into relevant topics such as seasonal affective disorder and the validity of psychological theories in predicting the outcome of depression. It also creates an extra dimension of commitment to ODIN amongst the researchers concerned.

SOLVING PROBLEMS IN ODIN

Decision-making within the EC

A late decision by the EC to shift from 100% to 40% funding for successful projects caused us considerable problems. The original study method had to be reduced in scale, and all the research partners had unexpectedly to find extra local resources if the core ODIN methods were to remain intact. As a result of this decision a group from Nijmegen had to withdraw six months into the project. The Santander team has remained within ODIN, but only has sufficient resource to study its urban site.

The pace of decision making within the EC means that coherent planning of changes within a study can be difficult. For example, it has taken some 18 months to achieve agreement and implementation of the financial changes to the ODIN work program following the Dutch teams withdrawal. Research leaders need to ensure clear and direct communication with their scientific officer, and with the EC contracts office, and should consider the costs and benefits of regular face-to-face meetings in Brussels.

Detailed study methods

Geographical distances and language differences mean that detailed interpretations of agreed study protocols may diverge over time. We have identified instances of this in terms of population selection procedures, exclusion criteria, definition of specific questions within certain study instruments and culturally-specific interpretation of 'prompt' questions. We have found that

the best way to minimize these evolutionary problems is to involve the research staff directly in international review meetings whenever possible. The research staff, and not the principal investigators, are the people who can identify such specific problems and then generate workable solutions to them.

We therefore recommend that projects such as ODIN include in their grant proposals a 'meetings budget' sufficient to fund the attendance of research staff as well as principal investigators at the regular international review meetings.

Isolation and demoralization amongst researchers

The problem of isolation remains despite our efforts to ensure regular contact. Researchers who have joined ODIN since the major meetings in June 1996 find it more difficult to develop the same sense of corporate identity as their colleagues who participated in those events. There has been a particular difficulty for the diagnostic interviewers. A stressful workload involving frequent contact with severely depressed people who, by the nature of their role, the interviewers are not in a position to help, tends to induce low morale and a sense of helplessness amongst the researchers themselves.

One solution to these problems has been to increase the amount of time spent by principal investigators and senior project staff in providing regular supervision and support sessions for research staff who appear to be at risk of isolation. Another has been to offer external supervision for interviewers and facilitators. In this context we consider that there is a strong case for an increase in the overheads paid by the EC for such studies (currently 20% of staff costs), to cover the maintenance and upgrading of high quality communication systems, to meet the extra demands of split-site administration costs, and to build in payment for supervision sessions and for additional training costs consequent on the staff turnover which is inevitable in a large and long-term study. In the longer term issues around funding of effective dissemination strategies, including time to prepare and propagate relevant materials, and costs of international conference presentations, also need to be addressed.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper describes the methods we have used to establish and sustain a European research group, created de novo in 1995, and now a mature and successful

organization. We consider that research groups like ODIN should have a productive future, and that it is in the interest of the EC not only to invest in setting them up, but also to ensure that they remain financially viable.

By concentrating in this paper on organizational process, our intention has been to provide a generic model or template which can be customized as required. Whether bidding for EC funding under Framework 5, or setting up a broader international research program, academic colleagues may benefit from our experience in organizing ODIN.

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