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Investigating Research

Research Proposal

MA in Educational Assessment



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An exploratory study into risk practitioners' motives for undertaking continuing professional education (CPE) and its impact on practice

Introduction

The risk management profession has seen a significant increase in practitioners undertaking CPE. It is not a compulsory requirement to work in the industry, yet more practitioners are now recognising the need to invest in CPE. Previous CPE literature has identified that other professions, particularly nurses have experienced a positive value and impact from attending CPE course. However, this study is intending to address an identified gap in the literature, exploring risk management practitioners' perceptions of the impact of CPE on their practice and their motives to undertake CPE. This is particularly relevant as I work for an institute that offers CPE programmes in risk management.

Overall research aim

The overall aim of this research study is to evaluate risk practitioners' motives for participating in continuing professional education (CPE) and its impact on their practice.

Aims and objectives of the study

To help guide the research, the following objectives have been formulated:

1. Explore practitioners' motivation for undertaking CPE
2. To explore risk practitioners' perceived value of CPE
3. To explore risk practitioners' perceived impact of CPE on practice

Literature Review

There are extensive literature exploring the motivation for undertaking CPE and its associated impact. Gopee's (2003) unpublished PhD thesis explored "nurses' perceptions of lifelong learning within nursing and nurses as lifelong learners". As part of his research design, he collected qualitative data across two focus groups, 26 semi-structured interviews with registered nurses and performed documentary analysis. He did not elucidate whether the nurses interviewed also participated in the focus groups. He also failed to explain his sampling approach, though readers are told that research subjects were recruited from acute

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NHS Trusts and Primary care. Findings from the focus groups, interviews and documentary analysis disclosed that personal, organisations and socio-political factors are motivators and de-motivators for lifelong learning. Gopee also discovered that nurses did not perceive mandatory CPD as effective. He seems to claim that lifelong learning is a favourable concept and must be welcomed. Conversely, Houle (1980) argues that the motivation to undertake a CPE programme is dependent on the individual's age, changes in careers, the quality of their work life and their professional work setting.

Researchers such as Stanley (2003), Gopee (2002), Caplin-Davis (1996), and Ellis and Nolan (2005) have also discovered similar motivational factors to Houle (1980). Gopee (2002) reported that nurses who observed nursing as a profession and worked hard were more interested in developing themselves, compared to those who perceived nursing as job which paid wages. Furthermore, nurses who had embarked on CPE in the past or were currently engaged in CPE were likely to be involved in some form of learning (Gopee 2003; Ellis and Nolan 2005).

Smith and Topping (2001) used a qualitative and quantitative research approach in exploring nurses' motivation, attitudes and impact of CPE on practice. A variety of instruments were used to collect data, following a Children's Neuroscience course attended by 14 nurses. These included self-report evaluations, questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and academic performance. Smith was both the course facilitator and line manager to a number of the nurses and this was likely to have influenced the opinions and perceptions of the research subjects. They found that the nurses' motivation to study were to improve knowledge, care of patients and professional relationships. These three themes also emerged as the perceived benefits of CPE. At one stage, Smith and Topping (2001) appeared to have criticised their own data, implying that some of the data from the semi-structured interviews remained superficial.

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Apgar's (2001) phenomenological study of 27 participants from a trauma centre in America also found similar motivational factors for undertaking CPE to Smith and Topping (2001). Her qualitative and quantitative approach sought to discover why nurses invested in CPE. Apgar used a semi-structured telephone interview for her study of two directors and 26 managers, as well as three focus group interviews with 18 nurses. Questionnaires were also completed by 1675 nurses, though the author does not inform readers of the response rate. She found that nurses participated in CPE to improve their skills, abilities and knowledge, which results in an improvement in patient care.

There is very limited literature on the impact of CPE on practice. Some researchers' (such as Gopee 2003; Sheperd 1995, Stanley 2003) study have concluded that CPE enhances the care of patients. Others, including Kruijver et al (2000) and Jordan (2000) have debated that it has no impact. Smith and Topping (2001) and Tennant and Field's (2004) studies on the other hand have led to definite result or conclusion.

Hogston (1995), through his grounded theory approach conducted unstructured interviews with 18 nurses from an NHS Trust. He used an opportunistic sampling to recruit the nurses and they perceived CPE to be essential in enhancing the care of patients as their skills and knowledge improved. Hogston (1995) discovered that the impact of CPE on practice also depended on managers providing a learning environment which offered nurses the opportunity to implement their skills. He included precise extracts of transcripts in his study and this helped to enhance the dependability and creditability of his research.

Adriaansen et al (2005) used a pre-test and post-test quasi-experimental research design to find the impact of a post-qualification course on care. Convenience sampling was used to select 50 licenced practical nurses and 57 registered nurses. The nurses were separated into two central groups and two experimental groups. The data collected were analysed using co-variance analysis. The analysis of the experimental group highlighted an

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enhancement in knowledge and insight, though when compared to the control groups, the finding was not statistically significant. It could be assumed that because the researchers developed the course, over-reporting of a favourable outcome was possible. Moreover, the control group may not have been suitable as they worked alongside the experimental groups. Additionally, the researchers in essence failed to assess the impact of a post-qualification course on practice, but rather, evaluated the development of knowledge.

The literature review has demonstrated the extensive research of CPE in the medical field, particularly nursing. No research however, could be located, exploring risk practitioners' motivation for participating in CPE and their perceived impact on practice. This gap in the literature forms the rationale for this study.

Research Design

This research study will adopt an exploratory approach in identifying the value of CPE to risk practitioners, their motive for involvement in CPE and the perceived impact on practice. An exploratory approach will allow an in depth examination of the research issue, particularly as this research has not been clearly defined in any previous literature. The approach will present the opportunity to discover and generate theory on the research problem.

Sampling

An opportunistic sampling (see Creswell 2007; Dowling and Brown 2010) technique will be employed to identify suitable participants for this study. Working for a professional membership organisation for risk practitioners presents me with access to appropriate subjects. My exclusive knowledge and attributes will be used to identify five to eight risk practitioners who have completed some form of CPE programme within the last five years. Potential participants will be contacted by telephone, inviting them to take part in the study, explaining that it is part of an MA programme. All participants will be provided with a short explanation of the study, their role, including their right to withdraw. An opportunistic sample

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is appropriate for this exploratory study as I am dependent upon the risk practitioners' agreement to participate.

Creswell (2007) and Glesne and Peshkin (1992) have discussed the problems associated with conducting a study within one's own culture. For example, power differential between the researcher and participants. There are however, advantages too and these include my familiarity with the programme which will be the initial focus of the interview. Researching one's own culture also enables "development of a deeper understanding of the phenomena under exploration" (Smith and Topping 2001, p.344).

Data collection

Qualitative data will be collected for this study through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. It is the intention to undertake a pilot interview of approximately two participants on the master's programme (as they are involved in some form of CPE) to anticipate some possible responses to assist my thoughts on possible question probes. The pilot test will also allow me to develop and make changes to the interview questions to ensure they explore the central aims and objectives of the research study (Creswell 2007). The question probes will also depend on the concepts which established and the theory which emerges through the open coding process (see data analysis section).

It is not the aim of this research to consider variables such as gender and age. Nor is it the aim to generalise findings of the sample population to the population as a whole. Rather, I hope to identify processes, for example evidence of the ramifications and indeed re-contextualisation of CPE course content into the practice.

The semi-structured interviews will consist of a few questions, relating to the key issues to be discussed. Each interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes, but will be dependent on the availability of the participants. A loosely structured interview is preferred because it will

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assure focus, but also give respondents scope to elaborate and discuss their experiences. All interviews will be recorded using an audio recorder, but prior verbal agreement will be sought from respondents (Dowling and Brown 2010). This method will capture risk practitioners' perceptions and experiences of CPE. If subjects decline to be recorded, then field notes will be taken during the interview and written up immediately after. Audio recording will be transcribed 'word for word'. Each transcript or field notes will be clearly labelled using codes to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Part of the data collection process will also involve writing memos and this will be discussed under the data analysis section.

Data analysis

Data for this research will be analysed using grounded theory approach. This method will allow theory to be generated, especially as little is known about risk practitioners motives and experiences of undertaking CPE, as well as the value of CPE and its perceived impact on their practice. According to Morse (1994, p.25-6),

A theory provides the best comprehensive, coherent and simplest model for linking diverse and unrelated facts in a useful and pragmatic way. It is a way of revealing the obvious, the implicit, the un-recognised and the unknown. Theorising is the process of constructing alternative explanations until a 'best-fit' is obtained that explains the data most simply. This involves asking questions of the data that will create links to established theory.

The grounded theory approach will require the data to be analysed in the early stages of data collection, rather than waiting until all the data has been collected (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Data analysis will firstly commence with a full transcription of the interviews after they have taken place. The transcripts will be analysed line by line in aim of identifying key phrases, words or "categories of information supported by the text" (Creswell 2007, p.161). This process is known as open coding and is linked with developing early concepts, which

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requires “identifying a chunk or unit of data (a passage of text of any length) as belonging to, representing, or being an example of some more general phenomenon (Spiggle 1994, p.493)

Similarly, memos will be used to record notes immediately after data has been collected. These notes will document the theoretical ideas about the codes and their relationships. The memos will be written documentations of what is evident from the data emerging from the analysis. Data collection, analysis and written memos will be a continuous process.

As concepts are established and new theory emerge, questions asked at the interviews may need to change in aim of strengthening the findings (Goulding 1999). This is known as theoretical sampling and it is “the process of data collecting for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, analyses the data and decides what to collect next and where to find it, in order to develop the theory as it emerges (Glaser 1978, p.36).

As well as theoretical samplings, axial coding will be performed. This process entails a comparison of ‘like for like’, searching for patterns and themes to develop. Spiggle (1994 p.493-4) explains that “comparison explores differences and similarities across incidents within the data currently collected and provides guidelines for collecting additional data”. Thus enabling concepts to be recognised and identified. Unlike open coding, where the concepts defines what is occurring in the data, axial coding explains the interrelationships across and between incidents, resulting in theoretical abstractions and proving a foundation for constructing theory. Goulding (1999, p.9) clarifies that “once a concept has been identified, its attributes may be explored in greater depth, and its characteristics dimensionalised in terms of their intensity or weakness”. The data will then be incorporated and considered as a core category which will explain the source for the theory that is developed. This core category will provide a theoretical explanation for the motives for CPE, and the perceived impact and value of CPE. Its significance will be visible through the data

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which has been collected. The theory will be "written up and integrated with existing theories to show relevance and new perspective" (Goulding 1999, p.9). The theory will then be deemed valid once saturation (see Creswell 2007) has been reached, that is when no new 'evidence' is developed from succeeding data.

Ethical Issues

Silverman (2005) stresses the importance of protecting all participants of a study, even adults, as they are usually overlooked as vulnerable individuals. Caution should be applied during interviews. An ethical review will be completed and approval obtained before data collection commences.

During all stages of data collection and analysis the BERA (2011) 'ethical guidelines for educational research' will be followed to ensure good ethical practices are maintained. BERA (2011) and Lewis (2003) discuss the importance of seeking consent from participants and they having the autonomy to choose to participate in the research. It is the intention of the researcher to provide all participants with full details of the research, explaining their role and involvement as participants (Christians, 2003) and emphasising their right to withdraw anytime during the research (BERA, 2011). Therefore, participants' agreement to participate in the research and to be audio recorded will be noted on the audio recorder or field notes should the participant decline to be recorded.

Mcauley (2003) argues that the confidentiality of participants should be maintained; therefore the audio data collected will be coded to preserve anonymity and segregated from the transcripts (Lewis, 2003). Any transcripts will be stored in password protected computer files and destroyed once the research has been marked.

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Contribution to existing knowledge

Several researchers have examined the impact of CPE on professional practices and practitioners' perceptions of CPE (see Smith and Topping, 2001; Bolton 2002; Hogston, 1995; Gopee, 2003). However, none of the published and unpublished literature has investigated risk practitioners.

The Chartered Insurance Institute (CII, 2011, p.11) has commented that

“...despite the obvious benefits provided by professional education, it is often difficult to get these understood by politicians and policy makers. The constant changing educational landscape drowns out the professionals message, which leads to a lack of comprehension of what we provide...As Professor Wolfe has argued recently, the stability and recognition of professional education is a strong benefit to employers and the public alike in providing assurance in relation to professionalism...”

Therefore, this study is highly relevant, as it will address a recognised gap in the literature and provide insightful knowledge of risk practitioners' motives for undertaking CPE and their perceived impact on practice. These findings will be particularly relevant to professional bodies (like mine) that design, develop and deliver CPE courses. It will hopefully encourage other practitioners to invest in CPE programmes and will call for a wider recognition of CPE in the risk management profession.

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