

Networking with NorFA

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Comprehensive national plans for continuing postgraduate education and research training are rare. Such programmes not only require substantial funding, but also the availability of a wide range of trained specialists to provide the necessary supervision and teaching. One potential solution to the problem lies in using the combined resources of several countries.

This approach has been adopted by the Nordic countries. The Nordic region comprises Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Iceland and Norway. The Nordic Academy for Advanced Study (NorFA) was established in 1990 to further Nordic cooperation in the area of postgraduate study and research training, at both regional and international levels (Nordic Academy for Advanced Study, 1995). One of the activities sponsored by NorFA is Research Courses, which consist of a period of five to ten days of intensive teaching. Last year, for the first time, non-Nordic participants were invited to attend.

The 1996 NorFA Research Course in Psychiatric Register Epidemiology was held between 26 October and 2 November in Aarhus, Denmark, and organised by Professor Povl Munk-Jørgensen (Institute of Psychiatric Demography, Aarhus, Denmark). Twenty-five researchers were invited to participate in the course, with seven of these being non-Nordic participants, representing Ireland (1), England (2), Latvia (2), Italy (1) and Germany (1). Most of the participants were psychiatrists at senior registrar or registrar level, who were either employed in academic research departments or planning to take up research posts. The inclusion of a political scientist and two statisticians not only broadened our horizons, but also ensured instant solutions for any methodological problems encountered.

The course was held over a period of eight days and consisted of a broad range of lectures and workshops, all in the medium of English. The atmosphere was informal but the high quality of teaching and the stimulating programme ensured a high degree of participation from those attending. The teachers came both from Nordic countries (Povl Munk-Jørgensen, Preben Bo Mortensen, Marianne Kastrup, Askel Bertelsen, Ville Lehtinen, Peter Allbeck and Lars Borgquist among others) and also from England (Robin Murray), Ireland (Eadbhard O'Callaghan) and Germany (Kurt Maurer). Many stayed on after

their particular lectures and participated in the ongoing teaching and workshops, while Professor Munk-Jørgensen and Dr Preben Bo Mortensen were present for the entire course.

The lectures covered a variety of topics relating to register-based research, including ethics, statistics, quality assurance and methodological issues, both generally and in relation to specific studies.

Three workshops were provided, with each participant able to choose the one most relevant to his or her research interests. Senior researchers were on hand at all times, but the emphasis lay on interaction between the participants. The goal of the workshops was to form networks within which projects of mutual interest would be pursued beyond the life of the course. Three broad titles were provided:

- (1) Aetiological aspects of mental illness
- (2) Longitudinal studies of mental illness
- (3) Health services based research.

At the end of the course, each workshop presented their proposed project to the group, where practical, theoretical and methodological issues were discussed. Individual workshop groups plan to meet again in 1997, in order to continue with the projects.

The educational aspects of the course had many dimensions, through both interaction with fellow 'pupils' and more established researchers. Participants were taken on a tour of the psychiatric hospital in Aarhus, where the Institute of Psychiatric Demography is located. The Department is responsible for running the Danish National Psychiatric Case Register (Munk-Jørgensen *et al*, 1993). We were briefed not only on its use in epidemiological research and national health strategy planning, but also on the administrative, data access and data protection aspects of its day-to-day operation. We were impressed by the high degree of cooperation which exists (and is necessary) between politicians, health administrators, research staff, clinicians and the Danish population which allows such a comprehensive National Register to be maintained. The hospital, founded in 1852, is home to a fascinating museum containing a large collection of Art Brut (paintings, writings and sculpture created by

psychiatric patients over the years, and other items of historical interest to psychiatrists).

We thoroughly enjoyed all aspects of our week, and endorsed the motto that learning can be fun. We would like to take this opportunity to thank both the organisers of the course, the various teachers and NorFA, and would unreservedly recommend the experience to anyone who has the opportunity to participate in a NorFA course in the future.

References

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