

SUSTAIN programme evaluation, 2015-2021

by

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with

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24 May 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Academy of Medical Sciences developed the SUSTAIN programme to enable female researchers to thrive in independent research careers. SUSTAIN provides training and support, primarily through professional development training, mentoring and peer-to-peer coaching. SUSTAIN has supported cohorts of 20-24 researchers each year since 2015, funded by the Academy, MRC and the Royal Society, the RAEng (since 2018) and the Royal College of Physicians (2015-2016). The two central aims of this evaluation were to identify the impact of the SUSTAIN programme on participants to date and make recommendations for enhancing the programme in the future.

The evaluation took a mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) approach. Document analysis provided a baseline of information; questionnaires elicited replies from both participants and mentors, making it possible to aggregate and quantify responses; semi-structured interviews drew out insights and lessons learned. Seven vignettes provide in-depth illustrations of benefits and processes.

Conclusions

Striking Success

The SUSTAIN programme is strikingly successful. It does indeed enhance the ability of participating women to thrive in independent research careers. In spite of their initial high level of accomplishment, as indicated by the selection criterion of holding prestigious research fellowships, the confidence-building and supportive networking provided by the programme have benefitted participants significantly. They have developed increased self-confidence, enhanced focus on strategic approaches to career decisions and resilience in the face of difficult situations. Although intangible, the early impacts of the programme indicate an increased likelihood of later more tangible career advancement and indeed some SUSTAIN participants have already achieved such success. SUSTAIN is clearly targeted appropriately at the critical inflection point at which participants advance towards independent status as researchers and leaders.

A Portfolio of Assets

The strength of the SUSTAIN programme is created by a set of key elements.

The mentorship element is central and is indeed much-appreciated by participants. For the most part the mentoring dimension has led to increased confidence and multiple career insights for mentees, also showing them how they in turn could become effective mentors. Significantly, mentors have also benefited from the experience, with some of them taking that learning into their own groups, departments or universities.

Co-coaching has also provided valuable support and an opportunity to discuss problems, ambitions and successes with external peers.

A significant development has been the rise of supportive networks within cohorts, initiated informally during the residential experience. The value of this is seen in the willingness of participants to trust other members of their cohort with both professional and personal issues even after their year together has finished.

Finally, high-quality professional development training workshops have had a considerable impact, with the benefits to individual participants varying according to the different topics. Across the board, however, participants find the topics appropriate and the targeting to their needs helpful.

Together, these four elements make for a resilient, multi-faceted programme.

Effective Organisation

The success of SUSTAIN as a programme is not accidental. It has been thoughtfully planned and well-organised. It is carefully monitored; for example, trainers are vetted and feedback from participants taken seriously. The overall programme is flexible and adaptable; staff are approachable and have put concerted effort into being responsive to participants' needs, as individuals and more generally. Innovations have been tested and adopted, such as the widely-praised 'speed-matching' of mentors and mentees and triads in co-coaching. Furthermore, the SUSTAIN staff have rallied rapidly during the pandemic, providing thoughtful virtual substitutes for as many of the programme elements as possible and offering individual help and support.

Evaluators' Recommendations for Consideration

Current SUSTAIN

For the current SUSTAIN programme, there are only a few, relatively minor, suggestions for possible enhancements. The principal recommendation is to preserve the key elements of cohort-building/networking; co-coaching; training and mentoring. Bringing individuals together across disciplines and geography, and careful matching and training of mentors and mentees, should continue. SUSTAIN alumnae could be offered opportunities to convene and to explore their next stage of leadership roles. A hybrid delivery model could be employed so that the programme reinstates (when it is safe to do so) residential and in-person interactions, while complementing them with the virtual mechanisms developed for training over the pandemic. An improved website could enhance opportunities for sharing stories, resources and training. A light-touch evaluation approach could track longer-term impacts. The programme should be allowed to evolve, as it continues to be responsive to emerging participant needs and changing contexts.

Increasing the impact of SUSTAIN

Given the positive influences of SUSTAIN on a small number of very fortunate award holders, it is timely to consider the bigger picture and the ways in which the impact of SUSTAIN could be enhanced in terms of addressing the needs of a greater number of individuals and indeed larger challenges, including but not limited to culture change in universities. Mechanisms for spreading the influence of SUSTAIN at various levels could include, for example: training of alumnae to become mentors themselves and to take on broader leadership roles in their institutions; developing a handbook for developers of similar programmes; providing advice to institutional 'spin-outs' as well as opportunities for champions to convene and share good practice; encouraging applications by women at the intersection of other under-represented groups; consultation-based development of a parallel programme for another under-represented group; sharing experience as to 'what works' and contributing to current dialogues leading towards long-term change in the UK's research culture.