Reviewer's report

Title: Improving accountability through alignment: the role of academic health science centres and networks in England

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Reviewer: Ewan Ferlie

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Major Essential Revisions

The NWL case study was weak and needs extensive revision or even excision (as this is a debate rather than an empirical piece). Why was it selected for inclusion? What data sources and methods were used? Is it the product of rigorous qualitative research? My understanding is that there were major problems with a loss of financial control in Imperial NHS Trust which appears not to be mentioned here. So is it an over optimistic account from an insider? The writing style here suddenly switches from the empirical to the highly normative (lots of ‘shoulds’) which is not appropriate in a scientific paper. I am not sure it adds much to the paper.

The literature review is full but rather UK centric. There may be more American material (e.g. case studies in ‘Academic Medicine’ and also see Kitchener’s good 2002 piece on a failed merger in Stanford in Organization Studies) to be brought in which sheds more light on governance issues there. It seems who gets the top job (CEO and or Dean), the role of the Board and the ringfencing of financial deficits (as at IC) may be key themes to specify more strongly.

The conclusion needs to be longer and stronger. I missed a clear overall message here. I wanted to know what a future research agenda in the field might be as we have had surprisingly little research on AHSCs in particular so far, which many would find surprising. This paper would be a good place to float some ideas.

Minor essential revisions

In terms of style, the paper is long and descriptive rather than analytic in places (e.g. pp19/20) with a lot of UK and NHS detail that international readers will find opaque. A good copy edit could make the paper both shorter and sharper.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:

no competing interests