Author's response to reviews

Title: Describing the impact of health research: a Research Impact Framework

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Author's response to reviews:

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Response to reviewers.

WE THANK BOTH REVIEWERS FOR VALUABLE FEEDBACK THAT HAS STRENGTHENED THE PAPER AND WE HAVE ACKNOWLEDGED THEIR INPUT IN THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT SECTION. SPECIFIC RESPONSES ARE MADE IN CAPITAL LETTERS WITH REFERENCE TO EACH POINT.

Reviewer's report
Title: Describing the impact of health research: a Research Impact Framework
Version: 3 Date: 4 September 2006
Reviewer: liz A farmer

Reviewer's report:
General
While I was initially concerned about the paper length I found it very clearly written and easy to follow. I think the paper makes a strong and useful contribution to the issues of assessing research impact, is well researched and carefully referenced and is valuable to thinking in diverse health fields and in multiple methodologies. I wondered if the writers might consider the work of the Canadian group CHSRF considering the research / policy interface?

WE HAD CITED JOHN LAVIS ET AL AND NOW MAKE EXPLICIT REFERENCE TO THE WORK OF THE CANADIAN HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH FOUNDATION (P.19, RESEARCH NETWORKS).

The main table of the Framework itself might benefit from a more 'snazzy' colour layout with the graphics taken through the description of the components to aid the readers orientation ~ as the paper is quite lengthy?.

AN INTERESTING SUGGESTION, BUT WE DID NOT FORMAT OR COLOUR CODE THE PAPER AS WE THOUGHT THIS COULD SUGGEST RELATIONSHIPS OR A LINEARITY THAT WAS NOT INTENDED. HOPE THE SIDE NAVIGATION PANEL FUNCTION OF THE JOURNAL CAN BE USED - WE HAVE FORMATTED THE HEADINGS FOR THIS PURPOSE.

There are a few very minor typos:
P 7 should insert "on" before "policy"? DONE
Table 1, item, 1.4 should be a full stop no a comma DONE
Pg 14 small r after eg? DONE
Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this pragmatic and useful paper.

WE APPRECIATE THE REVIEWER'S FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
Describing the impact of health research: a Research Impact Framework

This seems to be a helpful contribution to helping researchers and others think about what the impact of their research might be in different areas. However it covers such a broad range of impacts that some of specific details about those impacts and how they might be conceptualised and measured needs to be filled in.

There are also a few places where more methodological information would help the reader.

Areas where more information is needed are listed below.

WE HAVE ADDED A DISCUSSION IN THE INTRODUCTION SECTION (P.6-7) TO HIGHLIGHT THE CONTEXT OF RESEARCH IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND THE VARIOUS THEORIES AND FIELDS DEALING WITH THIS ISSUE, INCLUDING DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS, SOCIOLOGY OF SCIENCE, COMMUNICATION AND POLICY SCIENCE. WE HAVE ALSO HIGHLIGHTED DEBATES AND CONTENTIONS ON PRIORITISING IMPACTS AND RESEARCHER ACCOUNTABILITY, BUT EMPHASISE THAT WE ARE TAKING A VERY PRACTICAL APPROACH TO HELPING RESEARCHERS DESCRIBE THE IMPACT OF THEIR WORK, WHICH COULD THEN BE FRAMED OR USED FOR A VARIETY OF PRACTICAL AND ANALYTICAL PURPOSES.

2. More information is needed on the project methods. The LSHTM projects, which are used as data to help develop the framework, are not well described, nor are the means by which the data from the case studies were analysed. The empirical analysis is mentioned on page 10, but there is not much detail, and the reader is referred to another report which is available on request; but this information should probably be included in the paper. In other places the LHSTM research is cited without the supporting data (e.g., quotes, or other information) or findings really being described (e.g., page 21, second last paragraph).

THE METHODS SECTION HAS BEEN EXPANDED AND DETAILS OF THE LSHTM STUDY PROVIDED. THE LSHTM STUDY REFERRED TO IS NOW IN PRESS AT THE JOURNAL OF HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH AND POLICY AND THEREFORE IS CITED AS SUCH.
3. There are numerous references to areas in which research can have an impact, but specific examples are not often given, and where they are, there is often very little detail - e.g., page 28 (Climate Change); page 21 (Educational use)

THE AIM OF THE FRAMEWORK WAS MAINLY TO HIGHLIGHT POTENTIAL AREAS OF IMPACT AND THE EXAMPLES WERE USED TO ILLUSTRATE SOME POINTS. WHILE EXAMPLES EXISTED THROUGHOUT THE ORIGINAL NARRATIVE, NEW EXAMPLES HAVE BEEN ADDED AND PREVIOUS EXAMPLES, INCLUDING THOSE MENTIONED BY THE REVIEWER, HAVE BEEN EXPANDED. WE HAVE TRIED TO BALANCE THIS WITH THE FIRST REVIEWERS CONCERN ABOUT THE LENGTH OF THE ARTICLE.

4. Page 14: Research methods: one of the most important areas of impact seems to be missing - filing meaningful gaps in the evidence base (i.e., testing hitherto untested hypotheses).

PREVIOUSLY THIS WAS MEANT TO BE COVERED IN THE NEW RESEARCH QUESTION POINT, HOWEVER, IDENTIFYING RESEARCH GAPS THROUGH SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS, FOR EXAMPLE, IS IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO HAVE A AS A SEPARATE POINT, SO WE HAVE SPLIT THIS INTO NEW RESEARCH TOPICS AND THEN RESEARCH GAPS.

Discretionary Revisions

5. The discuss of the framework seems biased towards positive impacts of research; adverse effects are not explicitly discussed much (- there are a few passing references, and harmful effects are mentioned on page 42 - but may be worth more discussion and/or examples).

THE ISSUES OF BIAS AND INCENTIVES ARE NOW HIGHLIGHTED BOTH IN THE INTRODUCTION AND IN THE DISCUSSION.

6. There is no differentiation between "primary" and "secondary" impacts - for example differentiating between the main intended impacts, (e.g., on health) and "spillover" effects - would it be helpful to address this issue in more detail in the discussion - whether impacts can/should be prioritised? At the minute, the framework is presented as a wide range of possible impacts, and it is therefore possible for a researcher to take any piece of research, and through a process of post hoc rationalization, point out that their research has had "an impact". But does that impact actually matter? Do some impacts matter more than others? If you spend GBP5m doing an RCT to show that an intervention is effective, but the only impact of that research is on the educational curriculum, or on the arts, then that might not be as "important" as an impact on health. Perhaps this issue of prioritization is an issue for "further research".

WE HAVE NOW HIGHLIGHTED THESE COMPLEXITIES IN THE INTRODUCTION SECTION AND NOTED HOW ISSUES SUCH AS PRIORITISATION OR VALUATION OF IMPACT MAY VARY WITH RESEARCH FIELDS, METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES, FUNDERS' PRIORITIES AND SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXTS (AS WELL AS ONGOING RESEARCH ON THESE ISSUES). WE THINK THE ADVANTAGE OF A GENERIC, PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK SUCH AS THE ONE PRESENTED HERE IS THAT IT HELPS RESEARCHERS SYSTEMATICALLY DESCRIBE THE IMPACTS OF THEIR WORK, WHICH CAN THEN BE USED FOR A VARIETY OF PURPOSES AS REQUIRED.