Reviewer's report

**Title:** Contribution Mapping: a method for mapping the contribution of research to enhance its impact

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 3 May 2012

**Reviewer:** Justin Parkhurst

**Reviewer's report:**

This article is a needed area - improving how we conceptualise research impact. But it's not that new. It basically lays out how to more systematically do the things that many articles or reports have called for in the past - like getting early engagement with researchers and potential users, being explicit about the Knowledge Translation activities, and asking questions of researchers and potential users about their views on the effectiveness of those KT activities.

I don't know if the article really needs to tell us so much about perspectives on utilising research knowledge. It might be a distraction for many readers of this journal. Indeed, I did not really see much use to pages 3-4 (although I'm glad the authors think this way), aside from the basic point that knowledge gets used in contested policy debates - and so research may be selected by differing groups who are competing in political spheres.

A weakness of the paper, I feel, is that it criticises the difficulty of identifying 'impact' of research, but the approach at the end again talks often of utilisation - which seems to face the same challenges as impact in the first place - how to define utilisation and how to measure and attribute it. It is also unclear for a while whether the point of the article is to improve the use of health research, to guide health researchers, or to better judge researchers in whether they had impact. Personally, I think it was the second of these.

If so, I felt the strength I think is that it explicitly lays out one way to trace the process through which researchers in health can think about their contribution to the knowledge process. There are far too many calls for researchers to influence policy which don't recognise the political nature of policy decisions and the fact that researchers are not decision makers themselves. This takes a step towards more appropriate and realistic expectations for researchers - who probably should not be judged whether their findings directly change policy/practice, but should probably be judged more on if they contribute to an appropriate knowledge transfer process. This is a normative concept, but I think the paper is making this normative point. If so, they may want to be more explicit about this in the introduction and the conclusion.

I think the paper could be improved in a number of ways:

1) The terminology I fear, is a bit much for public health readers of the journal. Indeed, in many cases it is defining new terms for simple ones that already exist.
Linked actors and key users for instance are really just capturing basic concepts around the people involved in research use already. If these terms remain, a table of terms early on would help to make clear their use and what they capture. 'Evolving actor scenario' and 'alignment efforts' seem fancy ways to say interaction and engagement (or confused me- what the 'realisation of an actor scenario' might be for instance' The discussions on how knowledge increases or decreases the 'amount of complexity' further is not well enough explained and probably serves more to confuse than help.

2) There is a huge Knowledge Transfer and Evidence Based Policy literature, and I only see it reviewed in pieces here. They briefly talk about a lit review of empirical studies, but we have no details on how that review was done or what was found. The term Knowledge Transfer doesn't appear, but it is a virtual cottage industry. Works on Ev based policy also could be explored more (e.g. by Davies and Nutley, the Overseas Development Institue's 'RAPID' programme, and others) . I think they really could do with more exploration of the field and where this fits - indeed, there are a large number of works which do some of the steps they include - but I thnk they are making the point that there are fewer works which lay out all these steps: So plenty of works call for early engagement with potential users, plenty of works ask researchers about contributions or retrospectively try to see impact, etc. But are there really none which try to map out this whole process? If not, that should be more explicit and clear, with the literature reviewed justifying this better I feel.

3) The paper discusses that this will be applied to 30 research projects - so it kind of seems this is a paper which is describing the background ideas to another piece of knowledge utilisation work. That is fine, but it could be explained as such. Do we have any examples of it in practice (yet?) Even if not, it seems too vague and not grounded enough at times, simply reading like a basic methods text (e.g. suggestions to do interviews with researchers to ask about their impact).

4) Much is still subjective, even accepting that this is studying a process. What counts as engagement? for example? And perhaps most importantly, what constitutes 'research-related contributions'? This seems to suffer from the early criticism of knowing how to attribute causality.

Personally I don't think there are many new concepts here, and the new wording is therefore jargonistic and should be reduced. But what might be novel, and which is important, is that the paper helps brings together a lot of steps in the Knowledge Translation process, places emphasis on this being a PROCESSS to contribute to, and tries to map out for health researchers what they perhaps should be doing or expected to do. But right now I think it is too indirect in doing these things, does not capture all the relevant literature or make it clear enough where this adds, and uses terminology and theoretical concepts which I think make it hard for health researchers to actually understand what it is trying to guide them to do.
I'd like to see this revised to a format which is clearer where it fits, and also clearer for potential users. If it is being used or applied, some practical examples would help.

**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:**

I declare that I have no competing interests