Author’s response to reviews

Title: Developing a checklist for research proposals to help describe health service interventions in UK research programme: a mixed methods study

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Version: 2 Date: 28 January 2014

Author’s response to reviews: see over
Dear Reviewers,

The authors would like to thank you for your time and valuable comments. The manuscript has been updated and the changes have been tracked in the word document. As the comments have been addressed, we believe the paper has greatly improved. Please see how we have addressed each of the comments below:

**Reviewer 1**

- **1. Background** - While it is clear they could only get so far in a small study, it would help if the authors could provide more detail about the background to this work, and, in particular, the practical and intellectual contexts within which this work was undertaken.  
  **Response:** Additional text has been added to the last paragraph of the background of the manuscript to add clarity about why is this checklist needed, what it is expected it to achieve and whether it achieves these objectives on its own.

- **1.1 Context** - In seeking to enhance the quality of HS&DR research proposals the checklist therefore has to address a complicated set of requirements. It would help if these important requirements were more clearly identified in the paper.  
  **Response:** Further information about the remit of the Programme and the complexity of some of the interventions considered by the Programme is given in the first, second, and fourth paragraphs of the background. While the importance of generalisability of interventions is acknowledged, the description of details of the proposed interventions is considered necessary in order to evaluate proposals with regard to potential funding. Further relevant information has also been given in paragraph two of the background section.

- **1.2 The intellectual context:** (a) what can the literature tell us about why there is lack of clarity in research applications about the complex interventions and their contexts? (b) what has been done already to address this (and in what contexts, with what aims, on the basis of what theoretical considerations, and with what results)?  
  **Response:** A number of suggestions have been changed as suggested by the referee: More detail has been given in the second paragraph. In the results there is a reflection on Taylors (2011) checklist. Text has been added to the end of the fourth paragraph on the theory of checklists. Text has also been added on blurring at the end of the second paragraph. The second sentence of the third paragraph on page 5 of the paper has been deleted, when reading over this the sentence does not naturally fit here and should be disregarded. Even more information would have been added, however we felt it was important to manuscript as concise as possible.

- **2. Methods** - A review of existing checklists and “some relevant literature” is mentioned. It would help to have more detail about how the checklists were identified, and about what the review covered and how it was managed.  
  **Response:** The literature reviewed was informed by both of these aspects. The text in the second paragraph of the methods has been changed as suggested. Unfortunately there was a short period of time to complete the review, so it was not as comprehensive as we would have hoped, but we have added detail about snowball sampling.

- **3.1 Results** - The final sentence on p.9 - The authors may wish to reconsider the wording here, and also in the final sentence of the same paragraph.  
  **Response:** We agree, the sentence has been reworded, as well as the final sentence in the same paragraph.
• **3.2 Results** - On p. 11 the authors note that: “Most checklists which are used to report research emphasise the importance of having a good description of the participants. This is not entirely applicable to this current checklist; however it is still important to know about the patient group.” I may have missed something but am unclear why this is not applicable. Is this because the programme is focused on organisational developments, or is there some other reason? Could this be clarified please?

**Response:** We agree, the sentence has been reworded to make the point clearer.

• **3.3 Results** - While appreciating the difficulties, would it be possible for the authors to construct a more detailed list of what HS&DR proposals should consider under this (other contextual information) construct, as has been provided for the other constructs?

**Response:** A few more brief examples have been added at the end of the ‘other contextual information’ paragraph. We did not want to make this too detailed, as it would substantially add to the paper and is difficult to encompass in a short paper like this.

• **4. Discussion:** In the first paragraph on p. 15 the discussion returns to the point about a blurring between intervention and context, and it would be helpful if the authors could address the points made above (at 1.2).

**Response:** Text has been added to the first paragraph of the discussion.

• **Minor Essential Revisions – Methods** – By and large this section is clear, though it would help if the numbers of research applications reviewed and researchers who were involved at various stages were described more clearly, I had to hunt around a bit to find these figures.

**Response:** We have changed the text to add clarity to the numbers involved at various stages.

• **Minor Essential Revisions – Results** – The first paragraph on page 9 mentions nine key constructs in Fig. 1, but this figure only portrays eight constructs.

**Response:** We apologise for this error and have rewritten the text accordingly.

• **Minor Essential Revisions – Discussion** – The paper by Chalmers and Glasziou on “Avoidable Waste in the production and reporting of research evidence” is cited as ref 1 on p. 15, but it is not ref 1 (which refers to the MRC guidance) nor is it elsewhere in the list of references.

**Response:** This reference was added in error and has been removed from the references.

• **Discretionary Revisions** - The limitations described on p. 15 make it clear that this was an initial, small study, and the authors return to this point at the end of this section when they say (on p.16) that further research is needed to strengthen the checklist. Might it be better therefore to describe the work done to date as a pilot, or scoping study?

**Response:** The research was not intended to be a pilot or scoping study, it is a small developmental piece of work. A sentence has been added to the last paragraph of the discussion, to notify the readers this was a pragmatic study for in-house purposes.

**Reviewer 2**

• 1. The paper states that failure to specify adequately the intervention in question is ‘one of the most common’ reasons for the Funding Board to reject proposals – if the data is available it may be interesting to put some figures to this.

**Response:** Ideally we would have liked to added data on this, however this is documented in confidential funding board minutes, hence the general statement. Unfortunately there is no data available that can be shared in the public domain.
• 2. Stage one of the methods section states relevant literature was reviewed. It would be interesting to know how relevant literature was identified. For example, was it based on streams of literature that appeared relevant to applicants to the program or by other means? Alternatively, was it informed by a particular understanding of interventions / healthcare organisations?

Response: This is well pointed out; the literature reviewed was informed by both of these aspects. The text in the second paragraph of the methods has been changed as suggested.

• 3. Stage three of the methods – should state how many were contacted/took part (rather than in results). What was done with the data collected?

Response: We agree the text in the manuscript has been updated.

• 4. Stage four of methods – again state how many here and how was data handled?

Response: We agree the text in the manuscript has been updated.

• 5. The headings of the results currently reflect the initial checklist. I would suggest it may be clearer to use the final items as headings and describe the process these final items were arrived at. Further, could the number of subheadings in the results section be reduced, for example by combing in some way headings for stages and for items to allow clearer reading?

Response: The titles have now been changed to reflect the final checklist items. However it has been difficult to reduce the number of subheadings in the results section as it was felt it would be easier for the readers to have similar headings as the ones in the methods, to make it simpler to find the result for each method used.

• 6. The content of each of the ‘results’ sections should stick to the process by which the items were developed from previous checklists and the data collected, rather than introduce new conceptual discussions about the nature of each of the areas. E.g. discussion of the nature of leadership and culture. These sections can’t begin to do justice to the vast streams of literature written on these large subjects. A clearer picture of how prior literature that informed the first iteration of the checklist may help here (i.e. expand the output from stage 1).

Response: The text in the results section has been significantly changed. It now sticks to the process by which items were developed, rather than new discussions. The first paragraph also has another sentence which mentions some of the literature that informed the checklist.

Minor essential revisions
• The paper needs thorough proof reading.

Response: The paper has again been proof read by all of the authors and there are some small revisions throughout the manuscript.

Kind Regards,
Hannah Dorling