Reviewer's report

Title: Conducting capacity assessments in African universities: implications for building the field of Health Policy and Systems Research and Analysis

Version: 1 Date: 14 July 2014

Reviewer: Jane Doherty

Reviewer's report:

Major compulsory revisions

Title of the paper: I suggest re-working the title to reflect the main focus of the paper more accurately (for example, ‘A new methodology for assessing the health systems research capacity of African universities’). In your paper do you do point to how these assessments can help to build the field but you don’t explore this aspect in-depth.

Structure of paper: Normally the description of the paper’s method should come before you begin presenting results (of which the description of CHEPSAA’s assessment methodology is really a part) - so if you keep the ‘methods’ section, you should place it after the ‘introduction.’ It seems that to write this paper you used a) the reports generated by the assessments which in themselves provided some information plus b) you went through a process of reflecting on how the assessments had led to the development of a new framework for capacity development plus built capacity in the process. I’m not convinced that b) is any different from the normal process that authors go through when thinking through how to frame a methodological paper (so for me it doesn’t warrant a full ‘methods’ section). To make the logic of the paper more clear, I therefore suggest an alternative, which is to incorporate the ‘method’ section into the ‘introduction’ (expanding the second last para of the ‘introduction’ somewhat to make it clear that you followed a structured process to draw out the lessons). In a paper that is presenting a methodology I think it is okay not to have a conventional ‘methods’ section.

Acknowledging limitations/challenges: A big gap in this paper for me is reflection on the potential weaknesses or challenges of the approach - this is vital if you are recommending this approach for other units to use (and for any methodological paper). Self-assessment is one potential weakness but you could make some very interesting comments on how your approach dealt with/neutralised this potential weakness (e.g. by having an external partner, developing common understandings and standardised components, workshopping findings etc.). You do make the point that self-assessment was a strength as it built capacity but you need to bring it in here, too. You still need to acknowledge, though, that this sort of assessment might miss some important issues because of its predominantly ‘insider’ perspective: even the external partners would have become ‘insiders’ to some extent by the end of the process, given their close involvement with the
Description of the assessment methodology: The presentation of the process by which the assessment approach was developed is instructive - perhaps more can be said in the reflections/conclusions about how this approach could be adopted by other groups undertaking evaluations (i.e. to change the relationship between external evaluators and the people being evaluated, to deepen understanding of key concepts etc. etc.)? You do hint at this but I think, as it stands, your paper seems to suggest that the framework be adopted (as opposed to the process as well). Identification of the levels and themes is also very useful but, if a reader is going to decide to apply this approach to their setting, they would need more details of the issues explored under each theme. Perhaps you want to save the detail for another paper but, if you are proposing this framework, I definitely think you need to present more of the ‘meat’ of it e.g. what are the key issues under ‘leadership’ that were investigated, or what were the key questions asked (you do have a link to a report which presents the detailed methodology but I think you need to include a summary in this paper, otherwise the ‘framework’ appears strangely empty (and some of the headings for the themes are not self-explanatory). In Table 3, you should indicate the number of interviews conducted/people surveyed for each institution - this will give a better indication of the size of the project and lend weight to your subsequent reflections.

Testing the methodology: You state that the methodology was ‘tested.’ By this I think you mean that it was used across a number of sites and that the organisations concerned felt it was useful in identifying the main issues and building capacity - and that it was therefore a valid approach. I agree the approach is appropriate but I think the term ‘tested’ implies some sort of external validation (not that this would have been possible or necessary). I suggest not using the term but taking a paragraph to explain how the approach was well-received by the participating members and therefore appears to be appropriate and relevant to the contexts and concerns of HSR+A units. This might fit well under the discussion about limitations.

Discretionary revision

The networked nature of HSR+A: I was initially surprised that your framework did not include the concept of ‘the task network’ as a fourth level of investigation as I see it as something distinct from the external environment or organisational capacity. In many areas of research (not just HSR+A), policy-making and technology development, networking, cross-disciplinary collaboration and stakeholder involvement is becoming the norm. Managers of research (or research organisations), and of many other institutions, increasingly need to network to fulfil their daily functions. As you found in your assessments, the existence of a network both made it hard to define the boundaries of the assessment and pointed to the realities of this ‘networked world.’ In your paper you describe well the methodological problems associated with assessing organisations with ‘fuzzy’ boundaries but I wonder whether you shouldn’t suggest ways in which your framework could be adapted to deal with this better (or simply note that a methodological challenge for the future is to do this), as well as make
the point that, more generally, capacity development activities might need to explore ways to strengthen/coordinate/manage these networks to best effect. (By the way, the title for this section should perhaps be ‘Capacity assessments must take account …’)

It is not strictly true that there are no published frameworks for assessing the capacity of HSR+A institutes. For example, a project I was involved in, “Health Policy Analysis Institutes: Landscaping and Learning from Experience” developed a framework that incorporates organisational capacity, context and networking - the reports appear on the WHO website and the findings are written up in journal articles as well. Perhaps, rather than saying there are no frameworks, you should make the unique contribution of your study more clear (I see this to be a) the process through which the framework was developed which allowed the consortium members to build a common understanding, develop capacity, ensure a comprehensive assessment etc and b) a more comprehensive framework (although, as there is so little detail on the content of the themes, this is difficult to judge).

Minor essential revisions

General comments on grammar and use of language: Occasionally I noticed grammar or a use of language that I’m not used to, or which stood out for me as slightly obscure. If the article is accepted, I presume this is something the editing process will iron out so I have not noted these, especially as they are minor. Some examples are:

remember also to spell out acronyms when first used, including in tables/figures
last para, 2nd sentence: guidance or guideline?
fix up grammar in 1st para, p6
p10, last para, last sentence - fix up sentence structure

2. Table 1: It is difficult to compare the research groups visually in this table. I suggest that you expand the number of columns (i.e. adding headings such as ‘reporting channel’, ‘number of reachers,’ ‘numbers of support staff,’ and ‘focus of research’) - this would be possible in a landscape format.

**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