Reviewer’s report

Title: Examining Research Collaboration in Tehran University of Medical Sciences': whether integrated context is enough?

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Reviewer: Charo Rodriguez

Reviewer's report:

I would first thank and acknowledge the thoughtful effort that the authors of this paper have put into revising the previous version of their manuscript and responding to the reviewers’ comments. The resubmitted paper constitutes, without any doubt, a significant improvement over the earlier text. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the paper, in its current format, is not sound enough for publication in Health Research Policy and Systems. Please find below my main concerns.

Clarification regarding research questions has been largely improved. The authors have adequately explained what they consider ‘collaboration’ in this investigation at the beginning of their paper. They have also eliminated unnecessary references to a conceptual model that is not used in the study. Furthermore, they have enriched the ‘Background’ section with a convenient summary of their literature review on the topic of collaboration between researchers and decision-makers. I would suggest however a greater semantic coherence between the research questions as stated in the ‘Abstract’ and on page 4. Only an additional remark: Eleven (11) years have passed between 1995, the year in which the integration of medical universities into the Ministry of Health in Iran took place, until 2006, year in which the authors performed their investigation, and not twenty (20) years as the authors have noted in the second paragraph on page 4.

Explanations about research design and methods for analyzing data have also been much improved. The authors now provide rich information about how they have designed and validated the questionnaire used in the investigation. However, confusion regarding the population under study persists. In my opinion, and as the authors state in the ‘Abstract’, the population under study is 'completed research projects' granted in 2004 and over by 2006. From this, two different 'sources of data' have been identified, namely proposals and final research reports, and principal investigators; and two different 'tools or instruments' have been used for collecting the data: a data collection form (for proposals/final reports) and a self-fulfilled questionnaire addressed to the principal investigators. However, the authors confusingly state on page 5 that they have worked with two study populations.

The authors now clearly define the variables they have worked with and explain how the ‘collaboration score’ has been created. The coherence between this set of variables and the first research question (i.e. the extent and nature of
(collaboration) appears to be evident. I have, however, more problems understanding how the set of ‘academic variables’ that can be associated with the extent/nature of collaboration help explain why there is so little collaboration between researchers and decision-makers, and this after the integration of medical universities into the Ministry of Health. For instance, are there more tenure-track positions at the TUMS because of this integration? Or has the percentage of total time allocated to research by a particular researcher changed because of the integration? At first glance, I do not think so. Then, I cannot understand the influence of these variables on the collaboration score after the integration. Closely related to this, what are the ‘variables’ of the academic/health context that have changed because of the integration? In my view, the identification of such variables would be necessary in order to “help research policy makers realize how much a change of context has affected collaboration…” (page 4).

The weak sections of the paper are the last ones: ‘Discussion’ and ‘Conclusions’. The authors repeat descriptive statements about their main findings, but no real discussion is offered. Further, there is no clear connection between what the authors have learned in their investigation and what has already been published in the scholarly literature on the topic of collaboration between researchers and practitioners/decision makers. In addition, recommendations on the basis of their results would be expected in order to improve knowledge transfer in this context, as would directions for future research.

Indeed, I consider that the resubmitted manuscript constitutes a big step forward from the previous version. I also think that the investigation undertaken has produced very rich material, with which the authors can make an interesting contribution to better understand processes of collaboration between researchers and practitioners. The resulting paper nevertheless must be revised in order to accomplish these, still, unfulfilled promises.

I am sorry that I am not able to be more positive. I really hope, however, that my comments and suggestions help the authors improve the soundness of their manuscript so that it may be suitable for publication.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

**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 interest