Author's response to reviews

Title: How do we define the policy impact of public health research? A systematic review

Authors:

Kristel Alla (kristel.alla@uq.net.au)
Wayne Hall (w.hall@uq.edu.au)
Harvey Whiteford (h.whiteford@psh.uq.edu.au)
Brian Head (brian.head@uq.edu.au)
Carla Meurk (c.meurk@uq.edu.au)

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Author’s response to reviews:

Re: Manuscript 'How do we define the policy impact of public health research? A systematic review'

To the Editor,

Thank you for your acceptance of our manuscript, pending minor revisions. We have taken the opportunity to revise the manuscript in light of the reviewers’ helpful comments. A detailed response is outlined below.

REVIEWER 1

REVIEWER COMMENT

1. As a reader I would have benefited from a clearer understanding of the perspective of authors with regard to seeking definitions of research impact. For example, I believe there remains an entrenched view amongst part of the academic community that peer reviewed papers and grants are the end points for research impact. A view unlikely to be shared by the wider community.

AUTHOR RESPONSE

Thank you. We have revised the manuscript according to reviewer comments.
1.1 We have revised the introduction to include: “This study explores different definitions of research impact, with a specific focus on the applicability of definitions to advancing an academic understanding of how evidence informs health policy” (Introduction: page 4, line 15).

1.2 Additionally, we have referred to the perspective of authors with regard to exploring definitions of research impact in the discussion, as we say: “We need a definition that is clear about the different – direct and indirect – ways in which research can impact on policy and thus help us investigate it for academic purposes” (Discussion: Page 20, lines 16-17).

1.3 We make a similar comment in the conclusion: “We pose a definition of research impact that is primarily for the purposes of academic study of the impact of research on policy but that could be adapted to use in other specific contexts” (Conclusion: page 22, lines 14-16).

1.4 We have ourselves explored the views of researchers and policy makers in regard to research impact definitions in an upcoming manuscript based on interviews conducted with these two groups of stakeholders. This study included assessments by the academic community on whether they considered peer reviewed papers and grants as the end points for research impact. Our findings indicate that research impact among mental health researchers is often assessed using research outputs, but not defined as such, and that these are not considered good measures of research impact by academics. We have added a statement to this effect in the future research directions section of the manuscript (Strengths, limitations and future research: page 22, lines 4-5).

1.5 We now acknowledge in the manuscript, that academics, policy makers, bureaucrats, clinicians, patients and the general community are likely to hold different views on how to define research impact (Strengths, limitations and future research: page 22, lines 6-7).

REVIEWER COMMENT

2. While the search strategy was appropriate I note that the economic literature was not included - it should be noted that impact assessment is of great interest to economists. Further, the economic perspective of ‘impact’ would probably resonate strongly with community and funder expectations. From the viewpoint of economists, the generation of outputs from research are not impacts; they do not create impact until those outputs are used by an end user such as the health service, patients or clinicians. This point is different to the inclusion of ‘the economy’ in definitions of impact.

AUTHOR RESPONSE

2.1 We have discussed some research impact definitions that originate from economic literature in the ‘bibliometric definitions’ section. We have now added a statement to the manuscript which identifies that some bibliometric definitions come from the field of economics (Results, 4. Bibliometric definitions: page 12, line 18).
2.2 Some of the discussions around distinguishing the generation of outputs from research impacts have also been covered in the section on bibliometric definitions. Among others, we refer to the definition of research impact by Moed, et al. that distinguishes between research outputs and impacts: “Moed, Burger, Frankfort and Van Raan [49, p. 132] formulate a definition in which they clarified the relationship between research outputs (‘the extent to which the research creates a body of scientific results’) and impact (‘the actual influence of the research output on surrounding research activities’).” Later, on the same page we refer to: “Nightingale and Marshall [52] expressed the idea that citations exhibit the extent of academic significance, noting, however that this is not the same thing as research impact” (Results, 4. Bibliometric definitions: page 13, lines 11-23).

2.3 We note that the focus of this paper has been to conceptualise and not to operationalise research impact by review of definitions. We now clarify in the manuscript: “It is possible that relevant literature that failed to use this terminology was excluded, for example, economic literature on payback models [72, 73]. That said, economic models such as the payback model arguably represent operational definitions rather than conceptual definitions” (Strengths, limitations and future research: page 21, lines 21-24).

2.4 We have further addressed this comment regarding the inclusion of economic literature in response 3.1 below.

REVIEWER COMMENT

3. I believe the search strategy would have benefited from inclusion of economic databases.[…] as a suggestion and at the authors’ discretion, I suggest that the economic literature (and hence economic databases) be included for identifying discussions on research impact.

AUTHOR RESPONSE

3.1 We now acknowledge in the limitations section: “This review is limited by its conservative search term selection, as only publications that explicitly used the term ‘research impact’ or its close derivatives were included. It is possible that relevant literature that failed to use this terminology was excluded, for example, economic literature on payback models [72, 73]. That said, economic models such as the payback model arguably represent operational definitions rather than conceptual definitions” (Strengths, limitations and future research: page 21, lines 20-24).

3.2 We have now dedicated two paragraphs to the discussion of a sibling term ‘knowledge valorisation’ that originates from economic literature, and how it relates to term ‘research impact’ (Discussion: page 19, lines 6-21).

REVIEWER 2
REVIEWER COMMENT

4. I acknowledge that the research has been undertaken from an English speaking and Anglosaxon foundation, and this means that the selection and inclusion criteria (understandably!) have been framed from that vantage point. I feel that should be recognised more strongly…

AUTHOR RESPONSE

Thank you. We have revised the manuscript according to reviewer comments, as follows.

4.1 We now acknowledge in the limitations section: “The study focus is limited to literature that was in English. Thus, it may not have captured relevant discourses from European or non-English speaking literature” (Strengths, limitations and future research: page 21, lines 25-26).

REVIEWER COMMENT

5. …I would suggest you need to spend at least one or two paragraphs on discussing the European concept of 'valorisation'…

AUTHOR RESPONSE

5.1 We have added ‘valorisation’ acknowledging it as one of the terms that can be used interchangeably with the term ‘research impact’ (Introduction: page 3, line 23).

5.2 We have added two paragraphs on discussing the concept of ‘valorisation’ to the discussion section (Discussion: page 19, lines 6-21).

5.3 We now acknowledge in the limitations section: “The study focus is limited to literature that was in English. Thus, it may not have captured relevant discourses from European or non-English speaking literature” (Strengths, limitations and future research: page 21, lines 25-26).

Thank you. We feel that the issues raised by reviewers are now adequately addressed in the manuscript.

Kind regards,

Kristel Alla (on behalf of all the authors)