Reviewer’s report

Title: Measuring Research Impact in Medical Research Institutes: A qualitative study of the attitudes and opinions of Australian medical research institutes towards research impact assessment frameworks

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Reviewer: Stephen Hanney

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HRPS-D-17-00191

Measuring Research Impact in Medical Research Institutes: A qualitative study of the attitudes and opinions of Australian medical research institutes towards research impact assessment frameworks

Simon Denning et al

I enjoyed reading this highly interesting and well-conducted study. The Methods section is strong, and I particularly liked parts such as how the reflexivity resulted in a shift in the weight of time given to different topics. The Results were generally comprehensively presented, and relevant to the issues being considered. They were often insightfully illuminated by the supporting quotes. I noticed a couple of technical points that should be addressed please, and have three suggestions for the authors to consider.

1. The journal style is to have references in square brackets. The reasons for this are illustrated on lines 113/4 where a quick read of the text could potentially lead to some confusion.

2. It would be useful to add a list of abbreviations please. While they are generally spelt out on first use, it can still helpful to have a separate list. For example, I was unclear whether 'REA' on line 790 was a typo and should have read ERA, or was something for which I'd missed the full name.

3. There are just a few sub-sections of the Results that are probably too brief, and it would be helpful if they were either extended a little, or merged.

4. ERA is referred to several times, and I think it might be helpful for the non-Australian reader for this approach to be described a little more fully.

5. Finally, especially in the light of all the rich data in the Results, it would be appropriate for the Discussion section to go a little bit further in interpreting or commenting on the data. For example:
First, and linking with the above point, it might be useful to comment on the results in relation to some of the recent developments in impact assessment within the Australian system - even if this is just to set things up for a subsequent fuller analysis.

Second, there is a most interesting quote on lines 509-11 about the importance of having a clinical or therapeutic end point informing the work of the cell biologist. Then the Conclusions emphasise that if impact assessment is to contribute to optimisation of the health gains then further inquiry into how the assessment process may re-align research behaviour must be prioritised. Some previous studies of impact, and factors associated with it, have already explored some of the issues raised by these findings. They could be used to help interpret the findings and show how they might feed into the Conclusions. For example, a RAND-led study conducted impact case studies in Australia (including one on research at Hunter), Canada and the UK and concluded that: 'Basic biomedical research with a clear clinical motivation is associated with high academic impacts and high wider impacts.' (p.7) Wooding et al, (2014) Understanding factors associated with the translation of cardiovascular research: a multinational case study approach. Implementation Science. 2014.9:47. https://implementationscience.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1748-5908-9-47

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