Author’s response to reviews

Title: Increasing the capacity of policy agencies to use research findings: a stepped-wedge trial

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Author’s response to reviews:

Dear Editors,

Re: "Increasing the capacity of policy agencies to use research findings: a stepped wedge trial" (HRPS-D-18-00124)

Thank you for your recent email regarding our paper. We would also like to thank the reviewers for the helpful suggestions they have made regarding how we might improve our paper. Please find following a detailed outline of how we have addressed each of the suggestions made.
Reviewer 1.

1. This is an extremely well-designed and important study. I have no comments on the methods or approach—they are rigorous and clearly described.

We thank the reviewer for this positive feedback.

2. There are a number of randomized experiments related to research use in policymaking that should be integrated into the paper. The manuscript states: "Only three studies included any kind of control group and randomized to control and intervention." There are more than three studies that meet the criteria. I suggest that the authors see:


Thank you for drawing our attention to these interesting papers. As pointed out in Reviewer Comment Three below, our paper focuses on administrative policy makers in government agencies as opposed to elected officials. The suggested papers all focus on elected officials and
did not meet the criteria of the systematic review mentioned in the introduction to this paper. The paper has been amended to more clearly reflect the fact that the highlighted review focuses on administrative policy makers in government agencies:

“Using an inclusive definition of capacity building, a recent review (24) identified 22 studies which described an evaluation of potentially relevant strategies to increase the use of research amongst administrative policy makers in policy agencies…” (p 5).

3. The intervention is focuses on administrative policymakers in government agencies (i.e., not elected policymakers). These two types of policymakers are very different (e.g., administrative policymakers have narrow content expertise in a few specific areas, elected policymakers have shallow content expertise across a wide range of areas; the evidence use behaviors of administrative policymakers are likely to be less influenced by public opinion than elected policymakers). I think the manuscript would be strengthened if the Discussion included some thoughts about if and how the intervention might work if it was adapted to target elected policymakers (e.g., state legislators in the U.S. context).

As the reviewer notes, administrative policymakers in government agencies and elected policymakers operate in very different contexts. It is unclear at present what, if any, utility an adapted version of SPIRIT may have amongst elected officials, or indeed whether it would be feasible to administer even a highly scaled down version of the intervention amongst this particularly time-poor group. As per the reviewer’s suggestion, this is now noted as a potential area for further research in the discussion.

“A final possible direction for future research may be exploring whether an adapted version of this intervention might be feasible, or indeed effective, amongst elected policymakers.” (p.26

4. I also think the manuscript would benefit from some discussion of cost-benefits/effectiveness. The intervention appears to work, but at what cost? How much does it cost to increase research use in policymaking by a meaningful amount? What is a "clinically significant" (i.e., meaningful) change in research use? I understand that this is not a cost-benefit/effectiveness study and that these issues are beyond the focus of the paper. Nevertheless, I think that the manuscript would benefit from some discussion of these issues, even if only mentioned as areas
for future research. Here is a good example of how a cost-benefit/effectiveness component could be integrated.

As per the reviewer’s suggestion, the discussion now highlights performing a cost-benefit analysis as an important direction for future research.

“How a cost benefit analysis was not feasible for the current study, future research might usefully include such analysis.” (p.26)

Reviewer 2.

1. This is a well written, well designed, and interesting article. It focuses on an important topic, increasing the use of evidence in policy making. This is a topic lacking well designed research, so this article represents a significant contribution. The SPIRIT Action Framework is also a welcome contribution to designing future programmes and studies.

We thank the reviewer for this positive assessment.

2. My only question is regarding access to research articles, which is mentioned generally. How did the participants access subscription-only research articles? Did the study include subscription(s) so that a greater amount of research could be openly accessed?

Participants in SPIRIT accessed subscription-only research articles in whatever manner was supported by their agency (some agencies had widespread access and others did not). The SPIRIT intervention did not include provision of access to subscription-only research.

SPIRIT did, however, measure staff confidence in their ability to access research – by this we meant their perceived level of skill in searching for research evidence (SEER) – and one of the skills-building symposia offered was centred on increasing staff capacity to access research evidence through improved literature searching techniques.
3. Overall, an excellent article and solid contribution to the topic.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Dr Anna Williamson on behalf of the CIPHER team